STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST WEEKLY

SEPT. 14, '40

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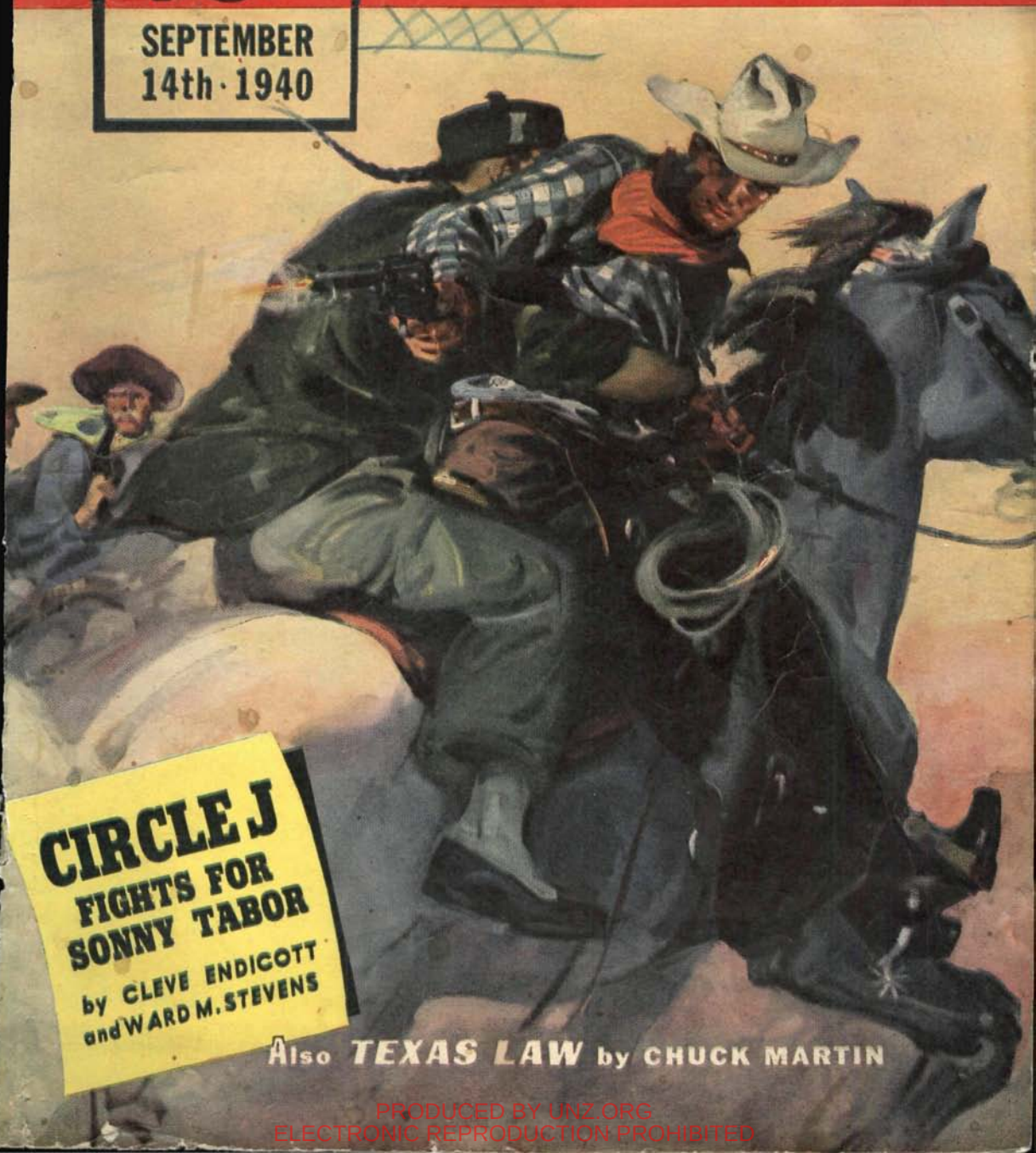
SEPTEMBER
14th · 1940



## CIRCLE J FIGHTS FOR SONNY TABOR

by CLEVE ENDICOTT and WARD M. STEVENS

Also *TEXAS LAW* by CHUCK MARTIN

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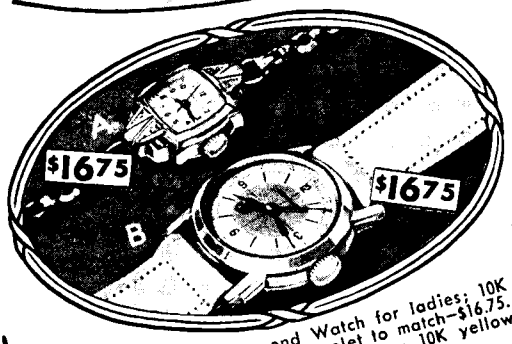


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**B-0565**—Benrus Sweepsecond for men; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $16.75.
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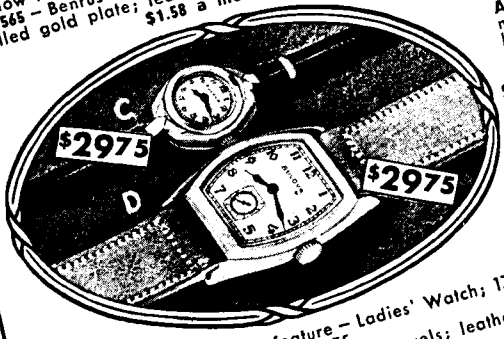


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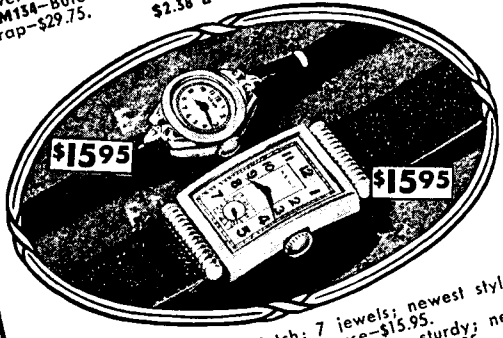


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STREET & SMITH'S FOUNDED 1902

# WILD WEST WEEKLY

CONTENTS SEPTEMBER 14, 1940 VOL. 139, NO. 6 Whole No. 1978

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COVER BY J. LESLIE ROSS

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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# A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

WE'RE getting cooler weather in most parts of the country these days —and it's certainly a relief from the scorchers of the past several months. All the cowpokes and cowgirls can go into the autumn season with deeply tanned pelts. In spite of the various hardships—or possibly because of them—people who live in the wide-open spaces live a more healthful life than most. Sunshine, fresh air and good food, combined with plenty of exercise, are the best tonics and medicines known to man. Nature prescribes 'em and never sends a bill.

To make a life rounded and complete, we all need entertainment. And there's no more economical or satisfactory form of it than reading —particularly if the stories feature favorite characters.

This is doubly true if a complete novel features *two* sets of favorite characters in a combination story.

You're getting that kind of story in the complete novel this issue. Sonny Tabor and the Circle J pards have long been at the head of the list, or very near it, in the votes you've cast by way of your letters to me. The authors, Ward M. Stevens and Cleve Endicott, invariably write an interesting story. And their combined effort is some of the best work either has ever turned out. Which reminds me I have a note from each of them.

DEAR BOSS: My friend Señor Stevens and I got together, after we'd plotted the story and written it, and tried to decide which of us was the more—ahem and hrrrumph!—famous. We finally decided that neither of us was quite so famous as, for instance, Gene Autry. So we compromised. Inasmuch as Circle J comes ahead of Sonny Tabor in the story's title, we figured it would be only fair that Señor Stevens' name should come ahead of mine or above it in the author billing.

Psst! Shhh! Not a word to a soul, but personally I'm sure Billy West or even Buck Foster could lick that Tabor hombre in a stand-up fist fight—or outdraw him with a gun for that matter. As for relative fame, my private opinion is that I am much better known to the general public than any gent name of Ward M. Stevens. Besides, he's getting a little bald and will be wearin' a toupee along with Tabor, no doubt, in a few years. Of course I wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelin's, so kinda keep this quiet and oblige,

Yores truly,
CLEVE ENDICOTT.

That so, Cleve? Well, here's another letter:

DEAR BOSS: Throughout the story I had to keep Sonny Tabor a little subdued so as not to let him outshine the Circle J hairpins too much. Tabor is much more adept with his fists or guns than any of those Montana hombres. Everybody knows that except Cleve Endicott, who is about as conceited a lobo as ever I met up with. But I didn't want to hurt his feelings because, after all, Endicott is fat and bow-legged and not very well known.

As practically everybody (except Endicott) knows, my name on the cover of your magazine means that it'll sell about twenty thousand more copies than usual—while a certain name which I won't mention, but which has the initials C. E., probably drops the circulation to a point to in-

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dicate that only his relatives buy the magazine featuring that name.

Anyway, with my coaching, Endicott didn't write quite so sourly as usual this time.

Psst! Keep all this under your hat, Boss—as poor fat Endicott has a sensitive soul and it would be embarrassing for him to discover my real opinion on certain points.

Yores truly,

WARD M. STEVENS.

I won't breathe a word to a soul, gents. Of course, if a couple hundred thousand readers should just happen to get wind of your opinions of each other, I'm sure they won't let either of you know. That is, not unless those multitudes of readers should perhaps suspect that you two are ribbin' each other—and us!

"Texas Law" is a great novel by your old pard, Chuck Martin. And a thrilling tale it is.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Most of the hell-raisers that came up the Chisholm Trail were Texas cowhands—and it took Texans to tame 'em. Those were the cost colorful days of the West, and I've tried to capture the spirit of the period, as well as the drama. While I was writing this story I was living, spiritually, in and around Dodge City of 1875.

I've covered up the real-life identities of some of the old-time gun-slingers of those days who appear in the story. A few of them I know personally. They're still alive and can spin hair-raisin' true stories all day—if they happen to like you.

Whenever a writer uses an old-timer's real name, that writer should know every detail of the character's true habits, history and characteristics. One time I used Bill Tilghman in a story—and I got a letter real pronto from his wife, who was still living, having been somewhat younger than Bill. She liked the yarn, but reminded me that Bill *never* took a drink. Neither did Wyatt Earp, for that matter.

Well, I guess "Texas Law" can tell its own story inside the magazine. So now I'll sign off and give it a chance.

Like always,

CHUCK MARTIN.

I reckon the readers will agree with me that you've done a good job of recapturing the drama of a most important era in Western history, Señor Martin. We'll be glad to have opinions from all our readers.

Here's a short note from a reader:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: My folks and myself liked "Give a Texan Rope—!" by Shoshone Gwinn, very much. We sure would like to see another story, starring Señor Gwinn's character, Lee Larribee, right soon.

Yours truly,

DAVID C. SPARKS.

Ariel, Wash.

We'll speak to Shoshone about it, pardner. I never knew him to be bashful about heeding a clamor for his special brand of fiction, even when it's practically only a one-man clamor. Being homely as hell himself, he wistfully makes up for it, as a rule, by making his heroes handsome. He has written an amusing and dramatic complete novel for us, to lead off next week's spread. His hero this time has a blue-black beard and is a mighty unusual gamblin' man. You'll see his picture on the cover, looking out of a stagecoach at a brace of six-guns. But to get the strange story behind his bizarre bets and actions, read "Gun-Slammin' Gambler," by Shoshone Gwinn. It's one nobody will want to miss.

"Longhorn Desperado," a great Tommy Rockford novelette by Walker Tompkins, is another you won't want to miss. Rockford is a big favorite with you all—and this story has a fine mystery payoff that'll keep you on the edges of your chairs. There'll also be a Sleepy Sloane story by John B. Strong, plus a number of other exciting stories and features. It's an issue that'll sell fast, pards—so you'd better reserve a copy at your newsdealers now. *Hasta luego.*

THE RANGE BOSS.

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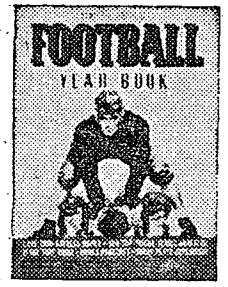


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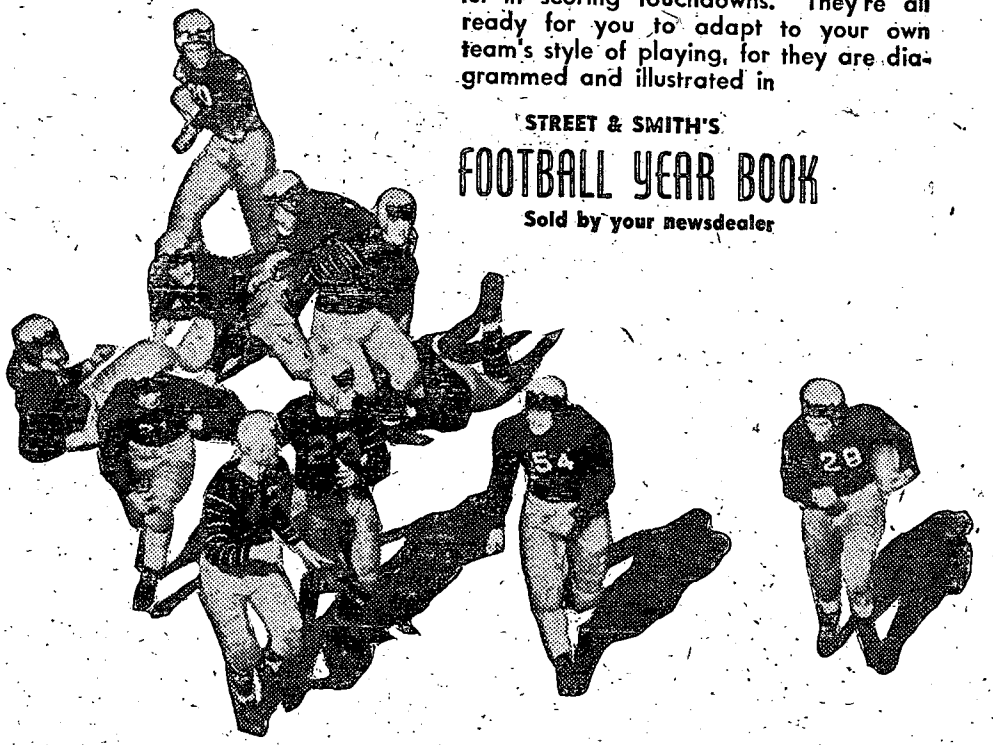

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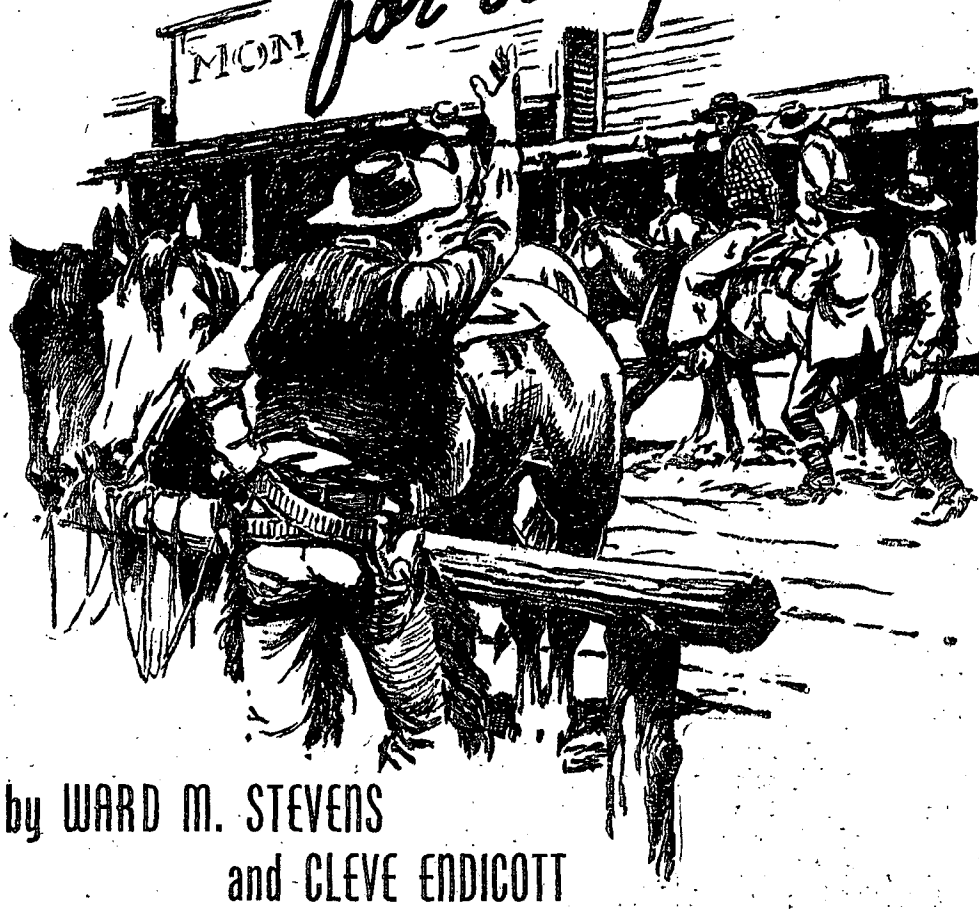
# CIRCLE J FIGHTS for Sonny Tabor



by WARD M. STEVENS
and CLEVE ENDICOTT

***When Sonny Tabor climbed that scaffold toward death he found a six-gun, but it cracked dimly through the heavy explosions that rocked Wild Basin like an avalanche!***

## CHAPTER I.

### A BULLET FOR A RANGER.

It was a frightful thing to watch the murder of a friend, without being able to lift a finger to help him! For a long moment Sonny Tabor's heart contracted to an icy lump and stopped its beating. Slim Lowrie, his old saddle pard of the Rangers, was about to be ambushed, dry-gulched by the unfeathered vulture who was even then lining the sights of his rifle against the unsuspecting Ranger on the trail below. The air at that altitude was thin and clear, and

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Sonny could see everything quite distinctly, although the scene of the impending tragedy was more than half a mile away. It all seemed strange and unreal—like a nightmare in which he was unable to move or cry out.

He raked his guns from his holsters and fired two quick shots. He knew that the dry-gulcher was out of six-gun range and Tabor had no rifle with him—but he hoped that the heavy reports might warn Slim Lowrie at least.

Tabor's hasty signal did more harm than good, for Ranger Lowrie pulled up his strawberry roan, halted in the trail directly below his unseen enemy, and looked back along the trail. It was doubtful if he saw Tabor, at all, for the full glare of the sun was in his eyes.

"Look out, Slim!" Sonny shouted at the top of his lungs, even though he realized that the Ranger couldn't possibly hear him.

The hombre in the green shirt and black chaparajos was kneeling behind a mesquite-fringed boulder and taking a careful and deliberate bead. Nearby, hidden from the trail below but not from Sonny Tabor, was the killer's coal-black cayuse. Both man and horse were familiar to Tabor; he had been trailing this desperado, in fact, for several days. But he hadn't expected to see his friend of other days, Slim Lowrie. Possibly he, too, had been on the track of the green-shirted hombre. If so, he'd blundered terribly.

*Cr-r-rack!* The sharp, ringing report of the assassin's rifle came a couple of seconds after Sonny had seen the winking powder flash. Lowrie, who was still halted and looking back-trail, lurched spasmodically, then pitched sidewise out of his saddle. Even while falling he had instinctively unholstered his Colt and now, as he rolled over in the dust of the road, he fired blindly and ineffectively at the puff of smoke that had blossomed out of the brush on the canyonside. That was like Slim! Even with the claws of death digging into his heart he could still fight! Slim Lowrie was game.

Sonny Tabor was already urging his pinto forward in a whirlwind gallop. He was not on the trail, but above it, and he cut straight toward the killer on the mountainside—or rather toward the spot where the killer had been, for he had jumped aboard his black horse and vanished amid the mesquite and cresote bush—not waiting to take another shot at the fallen Ranger, but anxious to make a getaway after his successfully performed chore. In less than two minutes Sonny had reached the boulder that had sheltered the desperado.

He would have followed the escaping dry-gulcher, but a faint cry from the trail below brought him up sharp. He couldn't leave the wounded Ranger, even at the cost of letting the snipper make a getaway.

As he began the descent of a hundred yards or so Sonny's quick eye caught the brassy gleam of the ambusher's freshly ejected shell. It was .30 caliber, and its bottle shape signified that it had been fired from a high-power rifle of the latest model.

Slim Lowrie's cayuse had shied away in fright but now had returned, and was standing near its fallen master. The Ranger had struggled to a half-sitting position, supporting himself by his hands. At the sound of Sonny's approach he lifted a white and haggard face. His hollow eyes blazed up with recognition—and anger.

"So . . . *you* were in on this, Tabor," the wounded man said jerkily.

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The bitterness of the accusation jarred Sonny Tabor—he'd almost forgotten that he and Slim weren't friends anymore, that Slim, at least, considered him an enemy. Sonny had once been a notorious outlaw, but had joined the Arizona Rangers after being pardoned by the governor, and it was while in this service he and Slim had become pards. Then Sonny had left the Rangers to take up again, apparently, a life of crime. In reality, he was working as an undercover man, though only two people in the entire Territory of Arizona were aware of it. Like almost everyone else, Slim believed that Sonny was a bandit and killer, a man who had betrayed a sacred trust.

"Are you bad hit, Slim?" Sonny bent over the stricken Ranger, who had collapsed on his side. Lowrie turned his face away, muttering, while the ex-Ranger gently drew away his flannel shirt and underclothing. There was very little blood, but when he saw the wound his hopes sank.

Tabor was familiar with high-powered rifles, and he knew what they could do. Ordinarily they inflicted small, clean wounds, but when the high velocity bullet struck a body cavity such as the abdomen or brain at close range, the jacketed slugs had a frightful explosive effect. A chest wound, unless the heart or great vessels were pierced, was far less serious than one in the stomach. Slim had been hit squarely in the belly, the bullet having passed clean through his body.

If Slim's stomach was empty when shot he might have a chance for life. The time of day precluded the chance of its containing food, but water would be nearly as bad. "Looks like you got it right over your belt buckle. Drink anything within the last hour or so?" Sonny asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"No, and I'm awful thirsty now—gettin' thirstier every minute," Slim gasped, licking his livid lips. "Give me—"

"Not a drop do you get, old-timer," Sonny said firmly. "It's bad for you. Come on, put your arm around my neck and I'll lift you onto my pinto. Paint will carry us double. Easy now."

With some difficulty he hoisted the limp form of the tall Ranger onto the back of the pinto. Slim neither aided nor resisted; the full shock of his probably mortal wound had left him nerveless and dripping with icy sweat. His eyes were sunken and lusterless and when Paint started out at a brisk pace the Ranger's head joggled from one shoulder to the other.

"Sorry, Tabor—reckon you didn't have anything to do with this or you wouldn't be helpin' me," Slim said, and his voice seemed to be coming from a vast distance. "Who was the she-wolf's son that bushwhacked me?"

"An hombre who goes by the name of Rudolph—Anton Rudolph," and Sonny briefly described the man. "He killed a saloon man down in Nogales two or three weeks ago."

"And he's wanted in Tucson and Tombstone for robbery," groaned Lowrie. "I was on the lookout for him—guess I wasn't lookin' out enough. "It's no use, Tabor. Might as well let me down so I can die and get it over."

"You've got more sand than that, Slim, so don't try to fool me," said the former Ranger, supporting the swaying sufferer with a powerful but gentle arm. "Is it hurtin' you much?"

"Not at all, at first, but now I feel like I ate a handful of hornets.

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Where . . . are you . . . takin' me? We're away to hell'n gone from anywhere."

"Governor Meredith's ranch is only two or three miles farther up, Slim," Tabor replied. "I'm takin' you there."

"I'd think that'd be the last place on earth you'd dare stick yore nose into," muttered the lanky Ranger.

Sonny Tabor smiled inwardly at that, for the home of Arizona's governor was the one spot in the Territory where he *was* safe. Only John Meredith, and his daughter Rita, knew his real status; it was through an agreement with Meredith that he had become an undercover man, an apparent outlaw with a dead-or-alive price on his head, unsuccessfully sought by every sheriff and peace officer in the Southwest. Not even his old friends of the Rangers suspected that Sonny was anything else than a fugitive from justice.

Paint, the outlaw's intelligent pinto, seemed to understand the situation, for he stepped along swiftly yet at a smooth and gentle gait. Slim's roan was following.

They were climbing steadily, and the mesquites had given place to cedars and finally to pines that stood straight and perfect against the intensely blue sky. It lacked about an hour until noon, and on three sides of them the great desert wilderness was unrolled, shimmering with heat waves, dazzling with mirages and sun reflections. In the distance rose the ghostly Superstition Mountains, on the other side of Phoenix, which could be seen quite plainly in that thin air.

A little farther up the mountain a richly grassed park unfolded, an almost level thirty acres bordered by tall evergreens. At the far end was the headquarters of Meredith's little ranch, the corrals, the house and outbuildings, all spic and span. The governor was an old-time cattleman, and it was to this mountain retreat that he retired as often as his official duties permitted. Sonny had reason to remember the place, for he himself had lain wounded here for many days. He wondered if Meredith was at home, and he wondered, too, with an increase of his pulse-rate, about Rita.

Meredith employed no cowhands, and Sonny knew that the man he saw coming out of the shed with a hackamore was the governor himself. He didn't see his visitors at first, and Sonny hailed him as he drew near.

"Well! Howdy, Sonny!" greeted the governor heartily, and then his rugged face changed expression. "Is anything wrong? Who—"

"This is Ranger Lowrie, sir," Sonny explained, already helping the now unconscious lawman to the ground. "He's been shot."

John Meredith seemed much younger than his sixty-odd years, in spite of his white hair and mustache. His straight body radiated vigor and energy, and in his well-worn range clothes he looked more like a veteran cowpuncher than the holder of Arizona's highest office.

"We'll carry him into the house," Meredith said quickly. "How did it happen?"

While they were carrying Lowrie inside, Sonny briefly explained what had taken place on Stepladder Mesa grade. Before he could finish, though, he stopped, tongue-tied. Rita, the governor's young daughter, was opening the door for them. Strange, but the golden hair, fine tan skin and pretty figure of the girl always had this effect on the outlaw. Sonny didn't quite realize it, but he was hopelessly, helplessly and se-

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cretly smitten with Rita. He could only mumble in reply to her warm and eager greeting.

"He's in a bad way—only a good doctor can save him," said John Meredith, and Sonny wasn't sure for a moment whether the governor meant Lowrie or *him*. But he nodded as Slim was placed on the bed.

"Nearest doctor's in Phoenix," he said. "I'll ride, pronto. There's no time to lose."

"Dad, do you care if I go with Sonny?" Rita asked Meredith.

The governor earned Sonny's eternal gratitude by nodding his consent.

"Tell Doc Anderson to come as fast as his rig will carry him," he said. "In the meantime I'll do what I can for Lowrie, which won't be much, I'm afraid." There was a little twinkle in his eye as he cast a glance at Sonny. If he suspected the state of Sonny's heart he seemed to have no very great objection.

Rita, who was on horseback most of the time, was already wearing her Levis, and Sonny went out to the corral to catch up and saddle her splendid palomino pony, Dusty. Within five minutes the two were hammering down the twisting trail that led away from the Meredith ranch. Where the road was not too narrow they rode knee to knee, but the pace was too rapid for them to do much talking. It had been many weeks since Sonny Tabor had seen Rita, and now with Slim Lowrie dying he had to put his own desires resolutely out of his mind. They must part, and quicker than Rita knew. When they reached the spot where the shooting had taken place, Sonny signaled for a halt.

"There's no need of us both to go to Phoenix, Rita," he said. "That killer Anton Rudolph might get clear away unless I get right on his trail. I can pick up his tracks from here."

It hadn't been easy to say, but duty came before anything else. Even before Rita. And she understood. She drew Dusty to a stop alongside the outlaw's Paint. She smiled anxiously but her eyes were proud.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Sonny? And you—you'll see us soon again?"

"As soon as I've accounted for Anton Rudolph, dead or alive," was the grim reply. "I'll get him if I have to chase him clear through Mexico, and you can tell your father so. Slim's the best hombre that ever wore a Ranger's star."

"I know," said the girl gently. "But he doesnt' know, does he, about the work you're doing? Don't you want me to tell Slim, so he won't keep on hating you?"

Sonny considered for a moment, remembering the agreement he had made with Governor Meredith to keep his lips sealed, even at the cost of his life.

"If the medico says that Slim won't live, then tell him, Rita," he sighed. "I wouldn't want him to die thinkin' I was a traitor. But if he lives, then Slim's got to keep on believin' that I'm no good—he wouldn't give me away on purpose, but if it ever gets out that I'm on the law side my usefulness will shore be over. *Adios, mi alma.*"

It was easier to call her "sweetheart" in Spanish than in English, and her laughter was like the tinkling of little silver bells. She told him "good-by" and their hands touched for a fleeting moment as they parted. Perhaps it was best for both of them that they could not know the tragic and ghastly pranks that Destiny was to play before they were to meet again.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE TRAIL LEADS NORTH.

FIVE WEEKS later Sonny Tabor found himself, somewhat to his astonishment, in Montana. Anton Rudolph, instead of striking across the Mexican border had headed in just the opposite direction, and Sonny had dogged his trail with the unrelenting tenacity of a bloodhound. The chase hadn't been a merry one. Both Paint and his master showed signs of weariness and strain, and to Sonny those grueling weeks seemed like months.

Although Rudolph's original start had been one of only a few hours he had succeeded in making the most of it, and Tabor didn't succeed in picking up his trail until dark. The next day he had fallen even farther behind, as the killer had traveled by moonlight. The trail took Sonny to Fagstaff, and then after a week of hard going, up into Utah. The thought of Slim Lowrie, who was probably dead and buried by that time, carried him ever onward.

In Salt Lake City he lost his quarry's trail altogether, and for a while he almost felt like giving up. A couple of day's detective work ferreted out precious information, however, and he learned that the fleeing desperado had taken a train for Ogden, and then Pocatello, Idaho. Sonny sent a cautious, unsigned wire to Rita Meredith and followed, also by rail, shipping paint to Pocatello.

Then he had taken to the saddle again, pursuing Rudolph like a shadow, sometimes a day or two behind him, sometimes only a few hours. The killer, who was fully aware that someone was close upon his heels, used every trick and subterfuge to throw the pursuer off the track but the advantages he won were brief indeed.

"We'll get that hombre, Paint, if we have to chase him into Canada," Sonny muttered stubbornly. And his gaunted but faithful cayuse snorted in agreement and understanding.

Tabor had never been so far from the range where he was born; except for a few forays into New Mexico, and into Sonora, he had never been out of his Arizona homeland. He found this new country majestic beyond his dreams, and at times its lonely grandeur almost frightened him. He had just crossed the snowy Continental Divide that morning and was now in the northeast slope, still above ten thousand feet and timberline. A whistling wind pushed at his back, and went chanting and moaning down the gulches and canyons; a wind that always blew, judging from the stunted and flattened trees below. Above and behind him towered the gigantic peaks of the Rockies, their shattered, frowning peaks rising above the belching clouds.

It was a beautiful, awe-inspiring land, and the view he had of a hundred miles of wilderness was something he would never forget, but somehow he *was* just a bit homesick for Arizona. Black birch, quaking aspen, arctic willow, fir, spruce—all these were very well, but when was he to see mesquite again, saguaro, and ocotilla?

Sonny had a hunch that Anton Rudolph wasn't very far ahead. The sign was quite fresh, as the hoof marks testified. There was a chance, of course, that the man ahead wasn't the one he sought; he had made mistakes before. He pressed on steadily over the difficult terrain, and gradually Paint descended into the rapidly thickening timber. The ground was soggy and covered with plushy grass, for it was ancient glacier

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ground, and the tracks they were following became more and more distinct.

Sonny increased the pace as the going became easier. Paint seemed glad to get out of the slide rock; the animal had been shod twice since the journey had begun, having worn out two sets of iron shoes.

Suddenly, as they entered a brushy gulch, Paint shied violently and flattened his pointed ears. Not thirty yards from them loomed a hulking grizzly bear. The big fellow hadn't noticed the newcomers; he was busily engaged in turning over rocks and licking up the bugs he found underneath. Sonny chuckled, and gave his trembling pinto a reassuring pat. He had a rifle with him now but there was no need to use it; the grizzly sighted them and galloped away flat-footedly but with surprising speed. The pinto bronc blew through his lips, then pressed on again gingerly while pretending to be very nonchalant about the whole thing.

"You're not foolin' me, Paint," his master laughed, "and you couldn't fool the bear. You're almost shakin' me out of the saddle.

The going became easier as they descended, but all at once the trail that Sonny had been following became lost in a hopeless muddle of other hoofprints. The Arizonan dismounted to study the situation. Rudolph had evidently joined somebody here, a group of five or six riders, perhaps more. Had the meeting been accidental? He could make little out of these new marks. He mounted again and rather doubtfully began tracing this new sign. He remembered the best trailer he had ever known—not an Indian, but a white hombre. What was his name? Oh, yes, Scott—Joe Scott. He was from Montana, too. Sonny wondered if he would ever run across Joe, but then—Montana was a mighty big State.

He was still thinking of this, an hour or so later, when the tracks came out on a well-defined wagon road. There were many wheel marks, and more hoofprints.

He kept to the road for a twisting four or five miles and then, without warning, he found himself in water hotter than the geysers of Yellowstone! As he rounded a turn he came face to face with a score of heavily armed men, who had been holding a conference in the trail. Hardly a dozen yards separated him from them, and he instantly found himself covered by at least a dozen six-guns.

"Get yore hands up, younker!" a deep bass voice boomed out.

"Who in hell are you?" another hombre demanded harshly. "Give an account of yoreself!"

Sonny lifted his empty hands, halting his pinto as the strangers drew menacingly about him. Rudolph, he saw at a glance, wasn't among them—they had come from the opposite direction, in fact—and he noted that the deep-voiced hombre, a man of fifty, wore a sheriff's star. It was obviously a posse. They had a prisoner, too—a pasty-faced, cringing fellow whose arms had been roped behind his back.

"This is one of the stage robbers, shore enough," hooted a member of the posse, glaring at Tabor. "A two-gun man! Take them shootin' irons offn him, Ed."

Sonny's mind was pretty busy while he was disarmed, questioned, and likewise tied with ropes. He gave the name of Johnson, the first that came into his mind. He carried no credentials, of course, and it would be all up with him if he admitted to the name Tabor, as that

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was notorious all over the West. There was no help for it—after all, he was guilty of nothing, and perhaps everything would turn out all right. His story of coming over the range on the lookout for work, however, was not believed.

"Let's ask the other'n," grunted the sheriff. "We know *he's* one of the robbers. Hey, Curzon!" he bellowed at the other prisoner. "Is this kid one of yore outfit? Don't lie. We'll get at the truth sooner or later!"

Curzon stared at Tabor through flickering eyelids. Sonny got a distinct and unpleasant shock when Curzon said: "Yeah. He was the one that held the hosses."

Sonny's jaw tensed. Why was the man lying? Was it simply because misery loves company, or was it through sheer maliciousness? At any rate, he felt the steel bonds of suspicion tightening around him.

"I thought so," crowed a posseman. "Let's string 'em up, right here and now!"

"Yeah! What we waitin' fer?" a tall, gimlet-eyed hombre chimed in.

The sheriff protested indignantly. "As an officer of this county, duly appointed, I'm sworn to uphold the laws of this State!" he cried. "It's my duty to jail these hombres in Wild Basin, and I'm goin' to do it, so help me!"

One of the others cut in coldly. "There's been vigilantes in Montana before, Williams, and they cleaned up the country without loss o' time. They didn't make bones about it, no sir! And what has been can be again!"

"String these two skunks up!" chorused several others. "Didn't they kill the driver and the Fargo man?"

Sheriff Williams moistened his lips nervously. "I understand how you jaspers feel," he admitted. "But I'm shore you'll listen to reason. These men here—"

Curzon, during the lynching talk, had gone even whiter, if possible, and he was trembling violently.

"D-d-d-don't hang me!" he bleated. "Didn't I . . . didn't I turn State's evidence just now when I reco'nized this other man for you?"

So that was Curzon's ratty idea! Sonny looked at him contemptuously, thinking that if he had to die it would be a shame to have to do it in company with this cowardly wretch.

The sheriff was continuing persuasively: "If you boys will be good, I'll guarantee positively that these skunkaroos will have an immediate trial, and that they'll be hung on the Wild Basin gallows within forty-eight hours. Is it a deal?"

The posse, so near to becoming vigilantes, finally decided that it was a deal. After a little more talk, they headed back down the road, with Curzon and Sonny Tabor in their midst.

Gradually the mountains dwindled to timbered foothills and Sonny saw that a great valley, almost circular, was opening out below them. It was grassland, a rich range if he had ever seen one, and in spite of his dark predicament he viewed it with interest.

A little farther on they passed the spot where the stage robbery had taken place, a trampled place alongside the road marked with several little puddles of crimson.

"I reckon you remember *this* well enough, Johnson," shrugged Sheriff Williams, with a meaningful glance at the Arizonan.

"I can't say that I do, sheriff," said Tabor cheerfully.

They entered the little county-seat town of Wild Basin, a settlement of

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perhaps a thousand people, with a single long street lined with business houses of log and frame, many of which catered to the thirsty. There was considerable excitement afoot, and it increased as the posse appeared on the street with their two captives. Men in miners' dress and others in cowpunchers costume stood on the plank sidewalks, staring curiously. There were muttered threats, too, against the prisoners.

"Ought to string 'em up!"

"Sheriff says there'll be a quick trial and hangin'."

"Well, *somethin'* has got to be done. There's been too danged many crimes 'round hyar lately. Say! One of them fellers don't look much more'n a kid—got a reg'lar baby face."

Sonny did attract plenty of attention. There was something about him and his outfit that was unusual. His saddle wasn't rigged in the Montana manner, and his equipment seemed strange to the natives.

Tabor didn't really look dangerous, and because of the mild boyishness of his face, which was marked by a bullet scar that resembled a dimple, people were apt to overlook the lithe power of his broad-shouldered body. He was wearing a checkered blue flannel shirt, brown chaparajos, Coffeyville tall-heeled boots and a cream-colored Stetson.

Suddenly the Arizonan's heart gave an amazed jump. A foghorn voice, vaguely familiar, had hailed him from beyond the hitch rail in front of one of the saloons:

"*Hey, Sonny!* I'll be a horned toad if it ain't Sonny Tabor! Waal, burn my saddle—"

The outlaw's astonished eyes fell upon the gray-haired ranny who had called out to him, and recognition dawned upon him. He'd seen this bowlegged old-timer before, down Arizona way. Nobody could ever forget that ferocious cowhorn mustache of peppered gray, nor those fiercely bulging brown eyes. He was wearing a slouchy black Stetson, woolly chaps, and a tattered and moth-eaten bearskin vest. Against one of his saddle-warped thighs was snuggled a big .45 single-action six-gun.

"Buck! Buck Foster!" Sonny remembered, but he did not speak the name aloud. He lowered one eyelid in a wink, which he hoped would mean something to the hombre who had so unluckily recognized him.

Old Buck was one of the Circle J outfit, owned by Billy West. He'd met them while they were on a cattle-buying trip in the Southwest and had become very friendly with them all. This was a bad time, though, to be called by his right name, and he hoped fervently that Sheriff Williams hadn't heard it.

Unfortunately, Buck's greeting had been so loud that half the town heard it! Williams and the posse pulled in their cayuses, looking from Sonny to Buck Foster and back again.

"Tabor!" ejaculated the peace officer. "Did you call this youngster Sonny Tabor, stranger?"

For the first time Buck seemed to notice that his Arizona friend was a prisoner, bound and in custody. His jaw sagged as he realized that he'd put his foot into something. He wilted like a punctured balloon.

"I reckon I made a mistake," he wheezed.

But Williams and the others were studying Sonny now with a new interest. "I reckon you *didn't*, feller," cried the sheriff. "I dunno who you are, but you've shore give us a hot tip. I got a notion that this *is* Tabor, the Arizona killer. I've got his "wanted" posters clear up here, and

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he answers to the description. He's either him or his twin, and there's a dead-or-alive reward for him! I *thought* there was somethin' fishy about the name o' Johnson!"

"I knowed right off that he was from Texas or down thetaway, judgin' from the way his saddle is rigged," said a posseman, "and his rope, too—"

"This don't change yore promise about the forty-eight-hour hangin', does it, sheriff?" another demanded belligerently.

"Nary a bit." Williams shrugged. "He'll hang, no matter who he is. Come on. We'll get him into the jail!"

## CHAPTER III.

### BUCK BREAKS THE NEWS.

TWENTY minutes later Buck Foster, astride his roan cayuse, was cantering out of Wild Basin. He was muttering to himself and interrupting his own mumblings from time to time with an angry and indignant snort. He had stayed in town just long enough to find out what he could regarding the details of Sonny's capture.

He hadn't been able to learn much, but what he did discover was unpleasant indeed. Things certainly looked black for Sonny Tabor. Buck knew, of course, that Sonny was an outlaw, a fugitive from Arizona justice, but he knew the younker well enough to know that he had nothing to do with the holdup of the Wild Basin stage. Although Buck had no inkling that Sonny was secretly working for the Arizona governor, he was as sure that Sonny was innocent of crime as he was of his own name.

"I'll be a horned toad . . . I'll be a five-legged horned toad!" he growled to himself, as he left the settlement behind him and went hammering along the road that skirted the valley wall toward the east. "Danged if I didn't make it worse'n ever for the kid by singin' his name out thetaway."

Then he swelled his chest a bit, casting gloom aside. Buck Foster wasn't going to let them hang an old Arizona pard, no, siree! They couldn't do it! If they tried it he, Buck Foster, would kick the props out from under Wild Basin. If the town wanted trouble they'd soon get their bellies full! He remembered that the Circle J had been in some serious trouble, down Arizona way, and that Tabor had helped Billy West, Joe Scott, and Buck shoot their way out of it. They weren't going to let Sonny down in *his* time of need!

He was plunging along at a gallop by the time he reached camp, some three miles from the town. The chuck wagon, in charge of Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook, was drawn up close to the banks of a swift-running stream of snow water, and the supper fire was already crackling merrily. Beyond was the remuda of horses, but near the fire Buck saw a strange bronc. A gaunt man in rusty black was just in the act of mounting it. He was shaking hands with Buck's boss, Billy West, and bowing and scraping. Buck gave a sniff of dislike at the sight of him; the old Circle J waddy was quick to form opinions.

While dismounting, Buck heard some of the talk that was passing back and forth. Evidently Billy West had concluded the deal he'd come to Wild Basin to make, for he was folding up a paper that looked like a bill of sale.

"We'll take delivery in a day or two then, Mr. Angsdorf," the Circle J owner was saying. "One hundred and twenty head."

"*Judge* Angsdorf," corrected the

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beanpole hombre, showing his gold teeth in a smile. He was folding up a fat sheaf of bills and after he'd climbed aboard his horse he stuffed them into a huge wallet.

"All right, judge, we'll be seeing you in town soon." Billy West nodded. He was a bronzed, gray-eyed man wearing a silk shirt of gray, expensive but much worn chaps, and handmade boots. Slanted over his eyes was a soft beaver Stetson hat. "I've looked the critters over," he added, significantly, "and of course I'll expect to drive the same ones back to Circle J."

"You'll get exactly what you saw and paid for." The gaunt hombre bridled up. "I wouldn't cheat you by substitutin' inferior stock."

"Of course not," said West politely. "Well, good-by, judge."

Buck Foster, putting his weight first on one leg and then on the other, watched Angsdorf lope away toward the trail. Buck's crooked and flattened nose twitched disdainfully—he hadn't liked Angsdorf's looks. Billy should have asked his advice before dealing with such a buzzard.

"Well, you old mossyhorn, what's eatin' you?" hailed the voice of Buck's friendly enemy and pet peeve, Joe Scott. "You look like you've just come out of a poker game."

"If I'd come out of a poker game my pockets would be full of dinero," said Buck boastfully, but he didn't flare up as he usually did when Joe threw the hooks into him.

For once, he didn't seem to want an argument, and Joe Scott, beak-nosed, freckled, and violently red of hair, stared at Buck as if he thought the old ranny out of his usual senses.

Buck was squatting by the fire now in moody silence. He had no comeback at all for Joe Scott.

"Well, Buck, I've bought Angsdorf's cattle," Billy West said. "We'll be herdin' 'em home *poco pronto*. Anything new in town?"

Buck broodingly poked the embers with a pine stick. "Do you fellers remember Sonny Tabor?" he asked, after a pause.

"I should say we do!" Joe Scott said heartily. "But why?"

"He's in the Wild Basin jail," Buck Foster blurted.

Billy and Joe stared in bewilderment, while Buck paused dramatically to let this piece of information sink in. Sing Lo, too, had overheard, and he came around from the rear of the chuck wagon, holding a knife in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other. The little yellow man, too, had known the Arizona outlaw and his almond eyes glittered with excitement. In the meantime, Buck had launched himself into the story, as far as he was acquainted with it.

"So he's been accused of a stage robbery," Billy broke in. "That's preposterous! There's been a mistake made, that's sure."

"It's too bad, Buck, that you gave him away," began Joe Scott.

"Don't I know it!" roared Buck violently. "I sang out afore I had time to do any thinkin', an'—"

"Maybe if you'd waited an hour you'd have thought things out." The bat-eared Joe Scott grinned sarcastically.

"Help me Hannah, I'll bash—" Buck doubled a knotty fist, but Billy West interposed before the old rannihan's temper got entirely out of control.

"I'd heard that Sonny had been pardoned by the governor—and then that he'd turned outlaw again," mused the Circle J owner. "I never believed that he was really bad—he'd had to kill, of course, and often, but he never pulled his guns unless he was justified."



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"Sonna Taba velly good hom-blay," Sing Lo chimed in.

"I wonder why he left Arizona," Billy West mused slowly. "I'm sure it wasn't because he was scared out, or because it got too hot for him—he always liked hot and smoky weather."

"We invited him up here—remember?" Joe Scott reminded his boss.

West smiled grimly. "He's not getting a very good welcome in Montana, is he?"

Buck Foster was pacing up and down beside the fire, fuming and sputtering. "By gannies, boss!" he thundered. "Let's us ride into town tonight and yank Tabor out of the hoosegow! We can do it! I could do it all my own self—"

"No, we can't do that," Billy West said with a grave shake of his head. "Better get on with the supper, Sing Lo," he reminded the little Oriental.

Buck blinked his bulging brown eyes in stupefaction and his long-horn mustache bristled indignantly. For a moment he stood with his mouth ajar, as if he thought his ears had deceived him.

"You mean to say that we're not goin' to do anything to help Sonny?" he bleated. "Are we goin' to stand by and see him hung by a crowd o' sheepherdin' numbskulls?"

"Shorely you don't mean that, Billy!" cried Joe Scott, who liked a fight as well as Buck and who, for once, was in full agreement with him.

"Now be sensible, you two fire eaters," urged the level-headed Circle J boss. "What good would such a loco scheme do Sonny? It would only make outlaws out of *us*. We might get hung, ourselves. We're strangers in these parts, remember." He studied for a minute. "We'll help Sonny, of course, and in every way we can, but we've got to talk it over, make plans. This will call for head-work more than for gunplay."

Billy West was just as anxious to free their Arizona friend as were Buck and Joe; the only difference was, he always thought things out before rushing in where angels feared to tread. The rushing was generally done by the impetuous Buck Foster.

They discussed the situation before supper and during it, and if the wind had been right, Buck's bellowings might easily have been heard in Wild Basin. Sing Lo was strangely silent while dishing up the grub, and he glided about as if in a poppy dream. He put sugar on the beef-steak instead of salt, and he was threatened with murder and mayhem when he slopped hot coffee down Buck Foster's neck.

It grew dark, and stars began to glitter in the frosty sky, while a timber wolf howled dismally from somewhere beyond the rushing creek. And still the Circle J rannies talked, trying to formulate plans that would have some chance of succeeding. Then Billy West discovered that Sing Lo was missing. He called several times, searched through the little camp, but the Chinaman was nowhere to be found. He had even neglected to wash up the tin plates, cups and pans.

"Now where could he have gone?" muttered the Circle J chief.

"Humph!" Buck snorted. "He's prob'ly got a bottle o' tanglefoot cached somewheres. I thought, by the way he was actin' tonight, that he was about due for a whingding. If I get my hands on that chink's yaller neck—"

But the grizzled old mossyhorn wasn't to get his hands on Sing Lo's windpipe, not that night, at least. The little Chinaman was astride his piebald bronc, perched precariously

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aboard with his knees high, in jockey style, headed at top speed for town.

The Circle J cook knew what he was doing, and he wasn't after a supply of tanglefoot liquor, either, as Buck supposed. Sing Lo had once traveled with a professional magician, and he was full of guile and cunning. Up his loose and flowing sleeves was many a magic trick, and behind his slanting black eyes was resource—and wisdom.

The Oriental hadn't missed any of the evening's discussion, and his mind was teeming with schemes. He liked Sonny; the Arizona outlaw was one of the few white men, outside Circle J, who had been good to him, and the Chinaman had never forgotten.

"Glate China philosopha say: 'Many a slip between noose and the neck,'" muttered Sing Lo. "So be!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### CONDEMNED TO DIE.

WHEN the sheriff and the citizens' posse halted at the lower end of the street Sonny Tabor had his first glimpse of the Wild Basin jail, a solid structure built of heavy stone blocks and with strongly barred windows. Adjoining it on one side was a small courtyard decorated with a piece of machinery that was both sinister and familiar—a permanent gallows. A flight of thirteen steps led to the platform of death, and above this towered the upright and crossarm of the gibbet. The scaffold had evidently been there for a long time; for its heavy timbers were weathered and gray.

At the sight of this awful emblem of death, Sonny's fellow prisoner, Bill Curzon, began to whine and whimper with fear. He was trembling so violently that he had to be helped from his horse and supported on his way into the jail.

The outer room served as the sheriff's quarters, and here Sonny and the slobbering Curzon were carefully searched and their belongings placed in Williams' desk. Then, freed from their ropes, they were pushed into the jail's dank bull pen. There were no other prisoners. Both were provided with an armful of sour and musty blankets, and their bed was to be the stone floor.

"You murderin' polecats will have your trial before night," Sheriff Williams snapped. "We're short o' lawyers here, but I'll appoint someone to defend you—you'll get a squarer deal than you deserve." He stood glaring in at the two caged men, peering through the door of steel rods, then he went back to his desk.

"You . . . you can see the gallows from this window—it's right outside," whispered Curzon hoarsely. "Do you think they'll . . . hang us?"

Sonny Tabor looked at him contemptuously. His hands were free now, and he could do what he'd long been wanting to do—punch in Curzon's twitching, repulsive face. But although the man was taller and heavier, he felt that it would be too easily done to give him any satisfaction; he hadn't the heart to hit the groveling wrench. He didn't even reply.

Supper was brought into them at five o'clock, and immediately afterward they were brought out of the bull pen and linked together with handcuffs. With the sheriff were ten or twelve deputized citizens with drawn guns. It was time, Williams explained, to go to court. He had promised a speedy trial, and he was certainly making good!

The two prisoners were marched up the street and they had less than

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a hundred yards to walk. The town's only courtroom was above the local firehouse and was reached by means of an outside stairway. Sonny and his shivering companion ascended this, prodded with gun barrels, and upon reaching the room above they found it jammed to overflowing with a colorful crowd of cattlemen, miners, gamblers, and citizens of Wild Basin. A shout went up as the accused men were pushed inside, and there was nothing friendly or sympathetic, either, about that clamorous uproar! Curzon collapsed onto a bench in front of the rostrum, and Sonny was pulled down beside him.

A lean scarecrow of a man, wearing loosely fitting black clothes and a boiled shirt, was presiding at the pine desk on the platform, and with the butt of a revolver he rapped for order.

"This court is now in session!" he shrilled. "Silence! Sheriff, are these the prisoners?"

"Yes, they are, judge," nodded Williams, and in a rumbling, almost inaudible voice he read something from a paper. He was interrupted with shouts from the spectators of "Cut the gab!" "Let's get it over!" and "Let's have some action!"

The trial, Sonny was soon to learn, was hardly more than a mocking farce. Human life was at stake, yet the proceedings would have disgraced the misdemeanor docket of a slipshod police court. One of the stupidest-looking hombres that Sonny had ever seen was appointed to act for the defense. The Arizonan dispensed with his services, but Curzon did a lot of whispering in the man's ear.

A jury was quickly selected, and seven of the twelve had been members of the posse that had made the capture, the others being three bewhiskered prospectors, a saloonkeeper, and a blacksmith.

Sonny didn't pay much attention to the crazy procedure. Witnesses —passengers in the looted stagecoach —gave their evidence, and two of them positively identified Curzon as being a member of the bandit crew. One of them even identified Sonny Tabor, but the others weren't so sure. Sonny smiled ironically. These hombres were probably flattened to the floor of the stage while the holdup was taking place.

The skull-faced judge glanced at a paper. "Sheriff Williams, you say you've identified one of the prisoners as Tabor, the Arizona mad dog?"

"Yes, your honor. He gave the name of Johnson, but there ain't any doubt in my mind that he's Sonny Tabor."

The judge glared down at Sonny, and his greenish eyes glittered balefully. He made a little speech. Montana, he said, didn't want any influx of other territories' badmen; it had enough of its own. Montana justice, he went on, was swift and ruthless, and it was high time that an example was being made. "Do you have the brazenness to deny," he concluded, "that you're Tabor, the outlaw?"

"That's my name," Sonny said, a bit wearily.

The jury retired, and promptly came back with the verdict: "Guilty as charged." The defense "lawyer's" speech in the prisoners' behalf had been worse than useless.

"Tabor, stand up," said the judge briskly. "I hereby sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead, execution to take place on the morning of the twenty-third, in the jail yard. Bill Curzon, stand up." The judge hesitated for a long moment. "In *your* case, Curzon, there seems to be extenuating circumstances—

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you assisted the prosecution by admitting that Tabor was guilty. Therefore, I direct that you be taken to the penitentiary—"

An angry roar went up from the assembly, and the jurist juickly perceived that he had made a serious mistake. He was quick to correct himself. This crowd wasn't to be trifled with.

"I likewise sentence Bill Curzon to be hanged in the jail yard on the twenty-third," said the judge hastily. "Sheriff, I remand the prisoners to your custody."

"Thank you, Judge Angsdorf," said the sheriff, with a sigh of relief.

On the way back to the jail Bill Curzon moaned and lamented his unkind fate. He was supplicating and profane by turns. "Only one day and two nights to live," he sobbed. "Day after tomorrow they're goin' to hang me! Damn that judge!"

"It seemed to me," said Sonny dryly, "that he was the best friend you had in court."

The handcuffs were removed, and the two condemned men were put back into the prison bull pen. Sonny had nothing to do now but think things through.

An escape, within the little time that remained, appeared out of the question. The jail, with its walls of thick stone, its floors of masonry and its heavily barred windows, seemed impregnable.

He wondered about Buck Foster. Was the rambuctious old buckaroo still with the Circle J spread?

But most of all he was thinking of Rita Meredith. She would never know, probably, what had happened to him. For that matter, what *was* going to happen to him? Would it do any good at all to lay his cards on the table and tell the sheriff of his real mission? He wouldn't be believed, that was certain. Williams would think he had cooked up the yarn to save his own hide. And there was no telegraph through Wild Basin. The sheriff would only laugh at him. Then too, if it did become known in Arizona that the governor had made an agreement with an outlaw, Rita's father would be ruined politically.

He decided to say nothing. An hombre, after all, had to die sometime and there was no use flinching from the inevitable. He might say a few words on the scaffold; he hadn't decided about that. Anyhow, as long as there was life there was hope, even though it was pretty slim.

The lamp in the outer office had been lighted, and it threw a shadowy network on the bull-pen floor in black and yellow. Williams and several of his deputies were on duty, and the place was thick with cigar smoke and noisy with good-natured laughter. Williams was in a jubilant mood.

All at once the office door opened, and a small but active figure came pattering into the lamplight. Sonny's eyes widened in surprise. Here was *another* Circle J man, the Chinese cook, Sing Lo!

"You shelliff?" piped the Oriental. "I wantee see catchum money man."

## CHAPTER V.

### THE JAIL'S HANDY MAN.

THE sheriff and his men guffawed in amusement. By "catchum money man" Sing Lo meant a thief. After listening to the Chinaman's jabbering they gathered that Sing Lo had been robbed of a sum of money several days before, and he suspected that one of the prisoners was the guilty man.

"You mean you want to identify

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one of 'em?" Williams chortled. "Well, take a look, chink. There they are, on the other side of them bars. Is either of 'em the one who stole your money?"

Sonny concealed a smile, but gave no sign that he recognized the Oriental, although he was sure that Sing Lo knew *him*. He wondered what sort of game the crafty Circle J cook was playing here.

Sing Lo peered at Bill Curzon, shook his head, and then looked at Sonny Tabor. Instantly he was all excitement, hopping up and down like a jumping jack. He pointed a long-nailed finger at the Arizonan.

"He the lobba! He lob me flo'ty-fi' dolla!" the Chinaman shrilled. "Him catchum money man!"

The lawman roared with laughter. Sing Lo was doing a lot to relieve the monotony of their long evening.

"Tabor only had nine dollars on him when he was arrested, so I reckon you're out o' luck for your forty-five dollars, my Chinese friend," laughed the sheriff as he opened the stove door and threw in a chunk of pitchpine.

"Tabor's goin' to be hung, day after tomorrow, so you'll get your revenge, chink," sniggered one of the others.

Sing Lo brightened, at this. He came up close to the door bars and made a series of fearful faces at the "lobba," screwing his yellow face into frightful grimaces, demonstrating the hate he had for the "catchum money man." Sonny didn't know what this was all about, but he snarled back at Sing Lo, just to make it look right.

The Circle J Chinaman made it known to the lawmen that so great was his detestation for the "lobba homblay" that he intended to stay around the jail so he wouldn't miss seeing the hanging. He got the mop and pail from a corner of the office and immediately set to work, scrubbing the floor energetically.

"Not a bad idea, Williams," grinned one of the deputies. "You could use him for a flunky around here, bein' as he's so dead set on seein' Tabor's neck stretched. He can run errands, too. I'm goin' to send him over to the Gem for some coffee and cigars."

Sonny was weary after this most eventful of days, and he soon rolled himself in his blankets. He slept restlessly, haunted by dreams in which Rita appeared, and Anton Rudolph, and finally the face of Slim Lowrie, cold and dead. "You'll be with me soon, pard," Slim seemed to say, and Sonny awoke, bathed in cold perspiration, to find that it was daylight.

Sing Lo was still "on duty," and evidently he had come to be a permanent fixture in Sheriff Williams' bailiwick. The deputies who had been up all night on watch were now being relieved by the daytime shift, and breakfast was being brought in.

It was mid-morning when Sonny's attention was aroused by a cautious tapping at the window that looked out over the jail yard. Beyond the bars was a heavy screen to prevent anything being passed into the jail; and peering through this, Sonny saw, at first, only a battered black Stetson. Then a pair of bulging brown eyes, a crooked nose, and a cowhorn mustache hove into view below it. It was Buck Foster.

"Sh-h-h! Is that you, Sonny?" Buck whispered hoarsely.

"It's me, Buck. It's all right—the sheriff's men are playin' cards."

The old Circle J ranny snorted fiercely. "It's a good thing for them—I'd hate to have to blast some slugs into 'em. I heard what they aim to do to you tomorra, Sonny, but by

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*Sonny triggered quickly, and the hombre fell over backward to roll under a box car.*

gannies we ain't goin' to let 'em do it! I got Billy around to my way o' thinkin'—he knows it's allus best to listen to *me*—and we ain't goin' to let 'em hang you. No, by gannies!"

"Where is Billy, amigo?"

"Buildin' up a corral to hold some cows we bought," Buck Foster explained. "We're takin' delivery of the critters today, and me and Joe Scott will have our hands full for a while—especially me, bein' as Joe ain't got much savvy about cows, or anything else."

Sonny chuckled, remembering how Buck and Joe railed at each other, scrapping like a pair of strange dogs, although either would have cheerfully died for the other. And at the drop of a hat.

"Billy and Joe is worried about Sing Lo," Buck grunted, pushing back his hat and scratching his head.

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"He's prob'ly losin' his dinero in some gamblin' house. That loco chink ain't got the sense of a wood-tick when he gets a load of tanglefoot licker—"

"He's here," said the outlaw in a low tone. "He's workin' as the sheriff's handy man."

Buck's mustache fairly stood on end and his eyes blazed wih anger. "Why, that yaller, rice-eatin' heathen!" he ejaculated blankly. "A deserter, hey? I'll get him by his Adam's apple—or Adam's *lemon*, from the color of it—and I'll—"

"Hold on, Buck," Sonny urged. "I think he's here to help me. I don't know what it is, but he's got a scheme of some kind."

"Waal, all right," said Buck grudgingly, after a time, "but don't you count on anything that fool chink can do. Put your trust in me and Billy and Joe. Buck Foster won't fail you, no, siree! When they bring you out of the jail tomorrow mornin' we'll be right on deck—*I got to be goin'!* Somebody's comin'. Sit tight."

A wagon had just turned the corner near the jail, and the Circle J veteran slipped away before being seen.

After his visitor had gone, Sonny Tabor felt his spirits lifting. He wasn't as friendless as he had thought, and his hopes began to take a more definite form. He hoped, though, that Billy West and his pards wouldn't do anything that would get them into too much of a mess with the law.

Sing Lo made himself useful around the jail in dozens of ways that day, and the sheriff and his henchmen regarded him with tolerant amusement. He carried in wood, polished the sheriff's desk, dusted the chairs, washed the windows and tidied up generally. And always, whenever he passed near the bull-pen door, he would abuse "Sonna Taba" in shrill pidgin English.

"When a chink hates somebody," said a deputy wisely, "he shore hates him."

"I'm goin' to see that the China-boy gets a good close-up view of the execution tomorrow," the sheriff promised generously.

"So be," said Sing Lo blandly, and he seemed very much pleased at the prospect.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A RAID IN THE NIGHT.

THE Circle J rannies hadn't been able entirely to repair the old abandoned corral where they were holding their newly purchased cattle, but three sides of it were tight enough, and they had brought up the chuck wagon and made camp on the weak section. Billy West looked over the layout approvingly. They had just finished supper—Buck Foster had cooked it, thanks to Sing Lo's "desertion"—and it was growing dark.

"Listen here, you bat-eared hyena!" the old mossyhorn was roaring savagely at Joe Scott. "If I hear any more remarks about them biscuits—"

"I didn't say a dang thing about 'em," was the red-haired puncher's meek rejoinder.

"I know you didn't," Buck fumed, "but help me Hannah, when I saw you get the bullet mold out of the wagon and put some of my dough into it—"

Billy West halted the argument, for he was worried about their future plans. Tabor was to be hanged the next morning, and the Circle J owner had decided to attempt a rescue, cost what it would. He was certain that Sonny was innocent of this Montana crime, and he couldn't calmly stand by and see him put to

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death, law or no law. They would have to use force, and with the odds immensely against them. The Circle J rannies were strangers in this part of Montana, which was fortunate. Billy West was wondering about the advisability of masking themselves when they struck the blow in the morning.

He was a bit annoyed at Sing Lo's strange actions. He was up to something, that was sure, but Billy West had long since given up trying to probe the Chinaman's subtle mind. He only hoped that Sing Lo wouldn't get himself into serious trouble.

Well, there was no use in worrying, and he forced his mind off the subject. If they were to be awake at the crack of dawn they would need rest and relaxation.

"A nice bunch of stock, don't you think, Joe?" Billy said cheerfully as he surveyed the new Circle J beef. "I got a good buy, too, even though they'll lose flesh on the drive home."

"You got too good a buy if you ask me," grunted Buck Foster.

"Meanin'?"

"I didn't like the looks of that Angsdorf hombre you bought 'em from." The old buckaroo frowned.

"It's the looks of the cows I'm interested in, not Angsdorf's," Billy grinned.

"I know, but you wait and see," Buck said mysteriously. "Why, that Angsdorf was the judge that put thumbs down on Sonny!"

"He probably did what he thought was his duty," said the Circle J boss. "We'd better be turnin' in now. We'll take our turns watchin' the cattle—I'll take the first watch, and call Buck at eleven, then he can wake Joe at two o'clock."

"Don't sing to the critters, Buck," urged Joe Scott. "We don't want no stampede." But fortunately for the peace of the camp, Buck was unrolling his soogans and was too busy to hear him.

It was a black, windless night, crystal clear but without a moon. The cattle were bedded down for their rest, but Billy West thought it advisable to keep an eye on them. He rode quietly back and forth, holding Danger, his splendid chestnut cayuse, to an easy walk, motion just sufficient to keep them both awake. By the dim red glow of the dying fire he could see the chuck wagon, the remuda beyond, but nothing outside the circle. Overhead were swarms of winking stars, and the delicate star dust of the Milky Way.

When the position of the Big Dipper told him that it was past eleven he awoke Buck Foster, leaving Danger saddled for a quick start at dawn.

"All's quiet, Buck," Billy yawned. "Judge Angsdorf's cows are well-behaved."

"Then they don't take after the judge," said the old ranny stubbornly. He threw some more wood on the fire, and after much fuming and sputtering he managed to slap leather on his fractious cayuse.

Like many an old-timer, Buck could doze in his saddle, half asleep and half awake, and before very long he was doing exactly that, lulled by the soft padding of his horse's lazy hoofs. A mountain lion caterwauled somewhere in the distance, and there was an uneasy movement within the makeshift corral, but nothing else happened to disturb the peacefulness of the wee early morning. At least, not for a while.

Then Buck Foster opened one eye. A moment later they were *both* open. He had heard the rattle of an iron horseshoe against a stone, somewhere over on his right. Buck stared, trying vainly to pierce the gloom. He thought he saw moving figures looming against the starry horizon, but

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couldn't be sure. Then he heard the creak of saddle leather, this time on his left.

Buck's gnarled hand dropped over the butt of his Colt six-gun. "Who's there?" he yelled. "Speak up, or by gannies—"

The answer came instantly, but it was a gun that did the talking! The last thing Buck remembered was a spangle of orange-red flame that split the darkness before his eyes like an exploding rocket. At the same instant something struck his head with the force of a trip hammer, a blow that blotted out the roar of the shot, and all consciousness.

Billy West was awakened by the thunder of the gunfire, but before he could reach toward the gun belt under his head he felt himself struggling in the dark, and being overpowered! Kicks and blows were raining down upon him, and in the faint light of the fire he could see the grotesque forms of seven or eight men. Joe Scott, too, was fighting for his life. Billy heard his angry grunts, and the smashing of fists against flesh.

The Circle J boss fought furiously, but the odds were too one-sided, and in two minutes he was effectively pinned to the ground with several men holding his arms and legs. Joe Scott had been treated in the same way.

"Blow their heads in," snarled a wolfish voice. "Why fool with 'em? finish 'em up!"

"Our orders is not to do any more killin' than we can help," disagreed another of the raiders. "We had to kill that old coot out there, 'cause he was about to shoot, but we'd better foller the chief's orders, Rudolph, and just tie these hombres up."

Fuel had been thrown into the fire to give more illumination, and Billy West could make out the hard, repulsive faces of their captors. The desperado called Rudolph was especially evil; his eyes, under the thick black brows, were as cruel as a cougar's, and his almost lipless mouth was as uncompromising as a knife gash. He was heavily armed, as were the others.

"Well, tie 'em up good," Rudolph said, growling. "But I still think it'd be better to scatter their brains. Leavin' live witnesses is damn risky."

Billy West and Joe Scott were expertly trussed up with lariat ropes, the knots being drawn painfully tight. Billy was filled with grief and rage, for what the gang had let drop had stunned him, filled him with sorrow and dismay. Buck Foster dead? So these murderous desperadoes had killed him! The terrible news numbed the Circle J owner, and he knew that Joe Scott, too, had heard, and was sharing the shock.

"Come on, let's get the stock a-movin'—it'll soon be daylight!" one of the raiders barked, and the Circle J men heard the thieves moving about the corral, popping leather at the cattle and getting them on the move. This was the game, then! These night riders were rustlers. Billy hadn't kept those cows long! Only twelve hours!

After a few minutes of confusion the noise dwindled and died into silence. The rustlers had moved on with the stolen herd, and Billy could be glad for one thing, at least. The thieves had neglected to gather up the Circle J horses.

"Are you all right, boss?" he heard Joe Scott groan out.

"O. K. Except that my legs and arms are going to sleep. Do you think you can get loose, Joe?"

"Nary a chance!" snarled the redhead. "The harder I work at the knots the tighter I'm hawgtied. Did you hear what they said about

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Buck?" he demanded, his voice unsteady and hoarse.

Billy answered in the affirmative. "If they killed him I'll foller 'em to hell and gone," Joe went on furiously. "I'll get 'em to the last man!"

Already the east was turning gray and the fainter stars were vanishing. Over the eastern mountains a faint pink blush crept into the paling sky. Billy rolled this way and that, trying to get a glimpse of Buck's body, but a slight rise in the ground prevented.

Time dragged by, and still Billy and Joe struggled uselessly with their bonds. It was broad day now, and presently the rim of the sun showed itself above the jagged skyline. And this was the morning Sonny Tabor was to be hanged.

Suddenly Billy West's heart gave a tremendous jump. He heard unsteady foosteps approaching, and a wrathful voice was muttering fiercely: "I'll be a horned toad! By gannies, when I find out who done it, so help me Hannah—"

"Buck!" chorused the two Circle J waddies.

They could see Buck now, weaving toward them on his warped legs. One side of his head, above his already bullet-notched ear, was covered with dried blood, and some of it had even dripped into his mustache. The Circle J veteran didn't seem to be badly hurt, however; his bulging brown eyes were ablaze with rage.

"Didn't I tell yuh them cows would bring us bad luck, boss?" he bellowed. "But who was it—who shot at me? Some low-down son laid a chunk o' lead alongside my head, and that's all I savvy."

"Get us loose from this, and cut the gab," growled Joe Scott. "It's no surprise to me if the bullet bounced off your marble skull. Untie these knots!"

"I got a notion to leave yuh lay there, carrot-top," Buck grunted as he bent over to cut the prisoners free with his knife. "Too bad you ain't layin' on an ant hill!"

"Hurry up, Buck!" urged Billy West. "Have you forgot about Sonny? This is the morning—"

"By gannies!" cried Buck Foster. "You're right, Billy! I *had* almost forgot, and we'll shore have to hurry some! Them rustlers will have to wait. First of all we got to get to Wild Basin! Why, they might have already—" He didn't finish, but the two others knew what was in his mind and shared his dread.

They swung aboard their horses and headed them full tilt toward town, hammering along the wagon road in a triple whirlwind of flying sand. The scattered outskirts of the settlement seemed to float toward them, and in that thin, clear mountain air they could make out every detail, although they were still nearly two miles from the center of town.

"By thunder, boys!" groaned Buck Foster. "We're too late!"

They could see the jail now, and the execution yard adjoining it. The latter was thronged with men, horses and vehicles on every side of the grim gallows that towered in the center. A human figure was already on the fateful platform, and the Circle J men gave a cry of horror when they saw it suddenly drop from view!

## CHAPTER VII.

### SING LO SETS THE STAGE.

"For ways that are dark, and tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinee is peculiar;
Which same I am free to maintain."

THOSE words from Bret Harte's poem came to Sonny Tabor's mind more than once during the long tense night that preceded the morning of

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the execution. The men about the sheriff's office were so sure, by this time, that the Chinaman was Sonny's deadly enemy that they paid no attention when Sing Lo came up close to the barred door to make faces through the bars. And Sing Lo had managed to do a little cautious whispering!

"Glate China philosopha say keep chin up topside, so be," the little Oriental murmured. "Thi'teen steps up to gallows. You lookee unda top step when you climb up tomollow. Something there flo you."

"But my hands will be fastened, Sing Lo," the caged outlaw whispered back.

"I fixee stlap," was the Chinaman's mystifying reply, and Sing Lo shuffled away before Sonny could question him further.

A late supper was brought in from a nearby restaurant for the two condemned men, and in spite of his uneasiness about the future Sonny ate heartily, for the meal was the best the town afforded.

Bill Curzon, however, was in a pitiable state, and Sonny actually felt sorry for him. The desperado realized, now, that his bloody trail of crime was indeed over, and he wept in remorse.

"I'm sorry I lied you into this mess, kid," he groaned. "I'll tell 'em the truth. You're innercent and you oughtn't to have to swing."

"It's too late now," Tabor said coolly. "They wouldn't believe you. By the way, Curzon, I've got a few questions to ask you. Do you know anybody named Rudolph? Anton Rudolph?"

"I never heard of him," Curzon replied, and although Sonny described Rudolph in detail, thinking that he might use some other name, Curzon still denied knowing the man, and Sonny believed him.

Curzon told Sonny that he had been with the bandit gang only a short time, only a little more than a week. "There's a high-up somebody at the head of the outfit, but I dunno who it is," he said gloomily. "Anyway, the gang didn't do nothin' to help me out of this jam, and I wish they was in hell!"

The long night hours dragged slowly, and neither prisoner slept much. Curzon rolled and smoked innumerable cigarettes, while Sonny watched the slow paling of the sky through the bars of the bull-pen window and thought of a face he might never see again. He thought of writing a letter, then decided against it—if he had to die it would be best that the news be kept from Rita. Or would it? Torn by conflicting thoughts, he saw the gray approach of what was probably his last dawn.

"Well, good mornin', Tabor, Curzon," rumbled the bass voice of Sheriff Williams.

A dim light now penetrated the jail, and already an excited stir could be felt rather than seen in the street outside. Sonny could hear voices, the clump of boots, the rattle of buggies and wagons. The big show was soon scheduled to begin. The noise outside increased until it became an uproar.

The sheriff jangled his keys and unlocked the bull-pen door. Behind him were several of his deputies, all with guns in their hands. Sing Lo was there, too, glaring in a diabolical way at the "catchum money man" who had "lobbed" him. As a specially granted privilege, the sheriff had allowed the Chinaman to hold the straps with which the condemned men were to be confined, two long and short straps, the latter to be fastened around the doomed men's ankles while the rope was being adjusted. The long leather belts were

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put in place there and then, being passed snugly around the waists of each man, pinned their arms to their sides.

Sing Lo helped the sheriff adjust the belt around Sonny, and the Chinese managed to whisper in his ear: "Rememba top step. Pushee on stlap. I got stlap fixed, so be."

This rang no bell in Sonny's mind, and for the life of him he couldn't guess what the Chinaman was driving at. Most of his hopes now were pinned on Buck Foster.

"Sorry, boys," said the sheriff, not unkindly, "but it's time to march. Got any last words to say while there's still time?"

As neither of them had any message, a side door of the office was opened and the prisoners were walked out into the unwalled jail yard.

"I'll take you first, Curzon," the sheriff muttered, seeing that Curzon was at the point of collapse. "Steady now. Up the steps, and it'll soon be over."

A great shout had gone up from the crowd at the appearance of the doomed men, but now a dead silence fell upon the gathering. Sonny looked about, and his spirits sank. The little square was lined with men, two and three deep, mounted and afoot, but he saw nothing of the Circle J punchers. They weren't here!

The three-ply, three-quarter-inch rope, with a noose at the end, dangled ominously from the crosspiece of the gibbet, and at the foot of the scaffold near the bottom of the steps were two plain pine coffins with the lids alongside, and screws and a hammer and screwdriver lying on one of the covers. Everything was in readiness, and Bill Curzon was already stumbling up the steep steps, followed closely by the sheriff.

Curzon stepped onto the trap, his knees shaking, and Williams bent down and buckled the short leather strap about his ankles. The sheriff's face glistened with cold sweat, and it was evident that he didn't fancy presiding at these affairs. He quickly adjusted the slipnoose about the desperado's neck, so that the big knot jerked up behind the left ear. Then the sheriff stepped back and released the trap.

It fell from beneath Curzon's feet, and the doomed man dropped like a shot, only to stop suddenly with a violent *cr-r-runch*. The fall had broken the man's neck, but for what seemed ages afterward the body continued to jerk and twitch. The head had sagged sidewise to the right.

Williams listened to the hanged man's heart, standing on one of the coffins in order to reach it, and finally pronounced Curzon dead. A couple of the deputies eased the body to the ground, and the noose was removed from the neck, so as to be ready for the next victim. There had been a murmur of low-voiced talk from the spectators, but now all fell silent again.

"I guess it's your turn, Tabor." The sheriff sighed. "It's too bad you had to come all the way from Arizona to Montana to get yourself hung."

The outlaw took a last look around the jail yard. No Circle J! But he did see something that made his pulses jump. Not far from the gallows was his pinto cayuse, Paint! The animal was saddled and ready, and appeared to be waiting. Nobody was near it. This looked like Sing Lo's doing, but how he was going to make use of Paint was a puzzle that Sonny was unable to fathom.

Sing Lo had told him to push on the strap that bound his arms to his sides. He did so—he was starting up

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the gallows steps now, with the sheriff behind him—and he felt the leather slip and give! The Chinaman, with a keen razor, had sliced the belt from one hole to another, so that pressure would force the prong of the buckle to slip several inches! Sonny suddenly found himself with plenty of slack! With a quick movement, he let the belt fall and jumped out of it as he surged upward toward the thirteenth step!

Concealed from sight on the underside of that step, held in place by two bent nails, was a Colt .45! Sonny grasped it in a flash, and in an instant he was atop the scaffold with the gun in his hand.

*Bang! Whan-n-ng! Z-z-z-z-zip! Cr-r-rang!* An inferno of noise shattered the stillness of Wild Basin—and Sonny Tabor was just as astonished as anyone else!

Sing Lo had set off a big bundle of queer Chinese fireworks nearby! There were bursts of fire and clouds of dense smoke of a dozen tints and colors; rockets went swishing in every direction, zipping over the heads of the bewildered crowd with a loud *who-oo-sh,* trailing showers of sparks. Pinwheels spun over the ground, and rockets stampeded horses and men alike. Cannon crackers were roaring over the sharper reports of smaller ones; "bombs" exploded with terrific detonations, Roman candles shot colored balls of flame to the heavens, and for a final touch came sulphureous fumes with a most ungodly smell, fumes that half blinded and suffocated everyone within a radius of fifty yards!

The Wild Basin citizens thought the world was coming to an end. Pandemonium reigned as dozens of horses broke into frantic runaways, bouncing buggies and buckboards behind them. A few crazily aimed shots were fired at Sonny, but none came very near him. The jail yard resembled a kicked-over ant hill, and all was a deafening bedlam.

*One* horse had been too well trained ever to run away, and Sonny whistled shrilly for Paint. The scaffold was about ten feet above the ground, but as the pinto trotted alongside the Arizonan jumped and landed scrambling in the saddle.

At that moment a group of three riders swept in at a gallop, pounding straight toward the gallows. The hombre in the lead was roaring at the top of his voice, and his bearskin vest was spread out in the wind like the fur of a flying squirrel. Just behind him was a gray-shirted man on a sleek chestnut horse, and a ranny in blue jeans and a jersey as violently red as his hair. Circle J was on the job at last!

## CHAPTER VIII.
### COW THIEVES' TRAIL.

ONE of the deputies had jumped toward Sonny and had raised his gun to shoot, but before he could trigger his weapon Sonny's own miraculously obtained weapon spat flame and smoke, and the officer staggered with a bullet-nipped arm. Two other lawmen had grabbed Sing Lo, but Tabor drove his pinto straight at them, bowling one over and causing the other to sprint to one side.

"Up behind me, Sing Lo!" cried the outlaw, getting hold of the little Chinaman with his free hand. A yank and a scramble, and the Oriental was safely aboard the pinto cayuse.

Buck and Joe were completing the demoralization of the Wild Basin citizens; shouting at the top of their lungs, they sent a fusillade of revolver shots skyward. Billy West was motioning—he couldn't make himself

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heard above the hubbub—signaling for Sonny to follow them as the Circle J trio thundered across the jail yard. Then, in less than a minute, they were all at the far side of town and in the timber.

Not until they had gone a good mile did they slow down.

"Now we'll make a big circle back to our camp," Billy West panted. "We're not followed, not yet anyhow. Say! What in blazes happened before we came up? It sounded like the Battle of Gettysburg."

"Sing Lo will have to give you the answer to that," the rescued outlaw chuckled. "I certainly owe him my life! Thanks, amigo!" he smiled back at the little Chinaman. "I'll never forget what you did for me."

"Glate China philosopha say," murmured Sing Lo blandly, "fiah clacka a day keep the sheliff away. So be."

The Circle J rannies listened with interest while Tabor told them how the little cook had doctored the strap, cached the gun sometime during the night, and how he had set off the fireworks display at exactly the right moment.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck grunted. "For once, it wasn't *me* he was playin' his goldurned tricks on, and for once they done some good!"

"What's the matter with your head, Buck?" the fugitive asked, as they began their wide swing around the town. "Were you hit?"

"Last night—by a bunch of low-down skunkaroos that run off our stock," growled the peppery old waddy, and he told Sonny Tabor of the night's happenings and the reason for their almost fatal delay.

"Billy bought the critters from that ol' scarecrow that sentenced you to be hanged—Judge Angsdorf." Buck Foster shrugged. "And I knowed they'd bring us a heap of bad luck."

"Did you recognize any of the men?" Sonny wanted to know.

"Nope," said Joe Scott. "They was shore hard cookies, though. One of 'em was dead-set on blowin' our heads off—the others called him Rewkoff, or somethin' like that."

"Rudolph," Billy West corrected.

Sonny Tabor started, as if galvanized by electricity. One again he was on the track of Anton Rudolph, slayer of Slim Lowrie! More reason than ever, now, for dealing out justice to this murderous renegade!

Without explaining his true status as an Arizona undercover man, he told his Circle J friends something about Rudolph, and how he had trailed that criminal across several States. He and the Billy West outfit immediately agreed to join forces and, if possible, recover the stolen herd and punish the rustlers.

"This Rudolph isn't the leader, anyhow—there's an hombre higher up, judgin' from what the rustlers let drop last night," said Billy West thoughtfully. "The criminal element seems to be pretty well organized hereabouts. Well, here we are at the camp, and it looks like the coast is clear."

They halted just long enough for Billy West to get a pair of extra guns and ammunition belts from the wagon. He also tore open two pasteboard boxes of cartridges and the party filled their empty loops. While this was going on, Sing Lo caught up and mounted his piebald bronc, which had returned to the camp.

"You lead the way, Joe," Sonny told the freckled redhead. "I was thinkin' of your trailin' stunts, just the other day."

"We shore won't have any trouble

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follerin' a trail like this," Joe Scott grinned. "The cattle have left a reg'lar road for us."

This was true enough, and although the cattle thieves had a start of many hours they were necessarily held back by the slowness of the beef herd, and that would enable the pursuit to gain on them rapidly. The way led into a bleak, mountainous country, and they crossed a succession of windswept ridges and timbered foothills. After they had gone several miles Joe Scott pulled his cayuse to a halt. Then, with his eyes on the ground, he made a small and then a larger circle.

"One of the gang left the others here—looks as if he went back toward town by a short cut," the freckled waddy explained.

"Well, we might as well push on ahead," decided the Circle J owner. "The trail seems to be getting fresher."

Presently they came to the railroad. The herd had been driven across the tracks, where their hoof marks disappeared in the scrub timber once more. The country ahead was a bleak wilderness of towering cliffs and intricate canyons.

Sonny Tabor saw a tiny depot and water tank half a mile down the track, and he asked his Circle J pards to wait for him while he sent a telegram. As the few dollars he possessed had been taken from him at the jail, he had to borrow the necessary money from Billy, who forced some bank notes upon him in a way that was not to be denied.

After the wire had been sent, the little party pushed on again into the rocky wasteland beyond. After a few more miles the cattle tracks led into what seemed to be a box canyon. The walls of this somber ravine were beetling crags and precipices, and there seemed to be only one way in. Proceeding cautiously, they soon reached a strong fence, provided with a gate. This was evidently the bandit stronghold, the hidden spot where they held their stolen stock. Joe Scott dismounted, opened the gate, and they all passed through. The gulch widened out now, and though the brush provided ample cover they went ahead gingerly, ready for instant action. They saw a herd of steers, many being Circle J stuff.

"There they are, by gannies!" Buck snarled suddenly, and his knotty hand whisked his .45 from its holster. "So help me Hannah, I'll—"

"Hold on a minute, Buck," ordered Billy West in a low voice. "They don't see us yet, and we can get closer. There's seven of those gunnies, and we could bungle this thing mighty easy."

The rustler encampment was less than two hundred yards from them, near the blind end of the canyon. The bandit horses were picketed nearby, and the men were gathered about a small fire, eating a meal.

Sonny's blue eyes had narrowed. Anton Rudolph wasn't among the crowd; evidently Rudolph had been the one who had left the gang on the other side of the railroad. That gave the Arizonan an idea.

"Those *bandidos* have all seen you, but I'm a stranger to 'em," Sonny suggested. "I'll ride right into their camp, and that will give you a chance to creep up on 'em. While I'm stalling you can surround those devils. Get as close as you can, but keep behind cover."

"You're takin' a big risk, Sonny," the Circle J owner said doubtfully. "If I didn't know how quick you are with your guns I'd say no, but—well, go ahead, and we'll do our best to cover you."

Leaving the others to dismount

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and work their way forward on foot, Sonny Tabor rode boldly out of the brush and approached the startled bandits at an easy trot.

"*Buenas dias, caballeros,*" he greeted cheerily.

## CHAPTER IX.

### GUN LANGUAGE.

FOR a minute the desperadoes were too amazed to do anything but blink at the newcomer. More than one hand moved gunward then, but seeing that Sonny was alone, apparently, the bandits didn't start hostilities. Their expressions, however, were far from friendly.

"Where'n hell did you come from, kid?" demanded one of the rustlers, a tall, bleak-eyed man with a lantern jaw and black mustache. "What do you want here?"

Sonny leisurely dismounted, as if making a social call. He gave Paint a little slap, sending him away. The animal began grazing at the edge of the little clearing. The bandits didn't know that Sonny had done this to get the cayuse out of possible lines of fire.

"When I saw the fence down there I thought there was a ranch somewhere up this way," Sonny drawled. "Don't this canyon go on through?"

"No, it ends right here," replied the lantern-jawed hombre with a sardonic grin. "And so do you."

Tabor pretended not to savvy the significance of this last remark. In reality, however, he was on the alert and every nerve was taut. He hoped that his Circle J pards were getting within effective six-gun range.

"You've got some mighty nice-lookin' stock penned up in here," Sonny Tabor continued innocently.

"What's it to yuh?" rasped a man with a square-cut red beard.

"Oh, nothin' much," smiled the Arizonan, his bullet-dimple deepening. "Only it would be nice if those critters belonged to you."

"What the hell—" bellowed the tall hombre as his clawlike fingers hovered over the curved stag handle of his holstered Colt. Static seemed to crackle from the angered eyes of the others.

"Take it easy," Tabor said nonchalantly. "I'll put my cards on the table. I'm on the dodge some, myself. Is there anything here for me?"

Half a minute of silence ticked by, during which Tabor was probed by seven pairs of suspicious and menacing eyes. Then the tension relaxed a little. The tall bandit laced a brown cigarette and lighted it with a blazing twig from the fire. Two or three of the others resumed their eating.

"My name's Conroy," said the tall rustler at length, "and I'm in charge here for the time bein'. Maybe we could use you, I dunno, that is, if you can use them sixes you're packin'. We lost a new man we took on lately—he was to be hung this mornin', along with another feller."

"He was hung, all right," Sonny replied mildly. "I happened to be there."

"Served him right for gettin' caught," Conroy said brutally. "Well, kid, you can stick around for a while. I cain't give you no answer until I talk to the chief."

The red-whiskered hombre leered murderously at Tabor. "And you might tell him, Conroy, that if the chief says no it will be jist too damn bad for him—seems to me he knows a leetle too much about our business."

The gang was still watching Sonny's every move, and he, too, was doing some sizing up. Arizona didn't have much on Montana when



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it came to hard characters! Two of the men seemed to be brothers, and each carried a gun in a shoulder holster as well as one at the hip. Another hombre, dirty and unshaven, had a knife-disfigured nose. One man was called Lumbo. The seventh member of the group, red-faced and thick of speech, was very obviously drunk.

"Here comes the chief now, I reckon," said Conroy suddenly.

Sonny had heard a crashing in the brush, and he thought at first that it was some of the Circle J punchers. But Conroy was right. Two riders hove into view and approached the bandit camp at a canter. For a few seconds Sonny was too astounded to make a move—this was about the last thing that he'd expected!

The hombre in the lead was a gaunt, sharp-featured man attired in a suit of sleazy black clothes—none other than Judge Angsdorf—the man who had sentenced him to death!

And Sonny was interested, too, and not a whit less, in the judge's companion. It was the renegade he had trailed for hundreds of weary wilderness miles, the man who had dry-gulched Ranger Slim Lowrie. And here at last was trail's end!

Angsdorf instantly recognized Sonny as the escaped gallows fugitive, and his voice rose harsh and shrill as he pointed a long, skinny forefinger.

"Grab that younker!" he screeched. "It's Tabor, the Arizona outlaw, and he—"

"Hell's blazes, it's the hombre that's been follerin' me clear from the Mex border!" echoed Anton Rudolph, his evil face distorted with hatred. Already he was raking his gun from its carved, concha-decorated holster.

Conroy yanked out his gun, also, and its blued barrel tipped up to come to a line on Tabor. "You sneakin' spy! Here's where I blow your damned brains—"

*Br-r-rang!* A long jet of flame streaked across the three or four feet that separated Tabor from the lantern-jawed desperado. With it came a languid puff of lazy smoke, and a crash of ear-splitting thunder that bounced and re-echoed between the canyon walls.

It was not Conroy's gun that had spoken, but one of Sonny's! Tabor's hands had moved with blurring speed, a double draw too fast for a human eye to register! And now he made a quick, tigerish leap backward, to put his back against a dwarfed pine. Conroy buckled at the knees; his eyes had glazed and a blot of crimson was at his lips as he pitched forward. Sonny's bullet had smashed through his chest, and he was dead before he fell.

As if that first shot had been a bugle signal, the Circle J rannies opened up a fierce fusillade from their vantage points. The rustler with the knife-scarred nose, who had already aimed a shot at Tabor, sank to the ground with one of Buck Foster's slugs in his body. One of the desperado brothers staggered, slightly wounded; he fell, but picked himself up again.

"What the blasted—" yelled the red-bearded man, picking up a double-barreled shotgun and discharging it into the brush. A moment later he spun around twice, then tumbled into the embers at the edge of the fire.

The Circle J punchers weren't content to remain behind cover; they charged down at the bandit encampment, their guns roaring flame and smoke. Bullets whistled and droned like insane bees, ricocheting from the canyon cliffs, and throwing up spurts of sand and gravel near the camp-

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fire. The gun flashes were like viperish flickers of flame, snake tongues of death.

"We've got yuh whar we want yuh now, by gannies!" bellowed the voice of Buck Foster between the roaring of the guns. "Surrender, or we'll wipe you out, so help me Hannah!"

Billy West and his pards were in the open now, and the bandits were shooting to kill. They were so unmanned, so shaken at this terrific attack, however, that their accuracy left much to be desired. One of the bandit brothers—the one who had already been slightly hurt—nearly killed Buck. His bullet clipped off the old mossyhorn's Stetson hat. But before he could fire again, he had gone down under Joe Scott's blazing Colt.

Anton Rudolph and Judge Angsdorf had remained in their saddles, although they were shooting as fast as they could empty their guns. Their horses were bucking and plunging, and this circumstance protected them from the gunfire, in a measure, besides making their own shots ineffective. One of Rudolph's shots tore a great white blaze on the tree that Sonny was crouched against, but the Arizonan had already turned his guns on Lumbo, who was coming at him at a crouch with a smoking .44 in each hand.

A bullet skimmed across Sonny's shoulder as his Colts roared in unison. Lumbo's arms dropped, his six-shooters dangling from his forefingers by their trigger guards. A stupefied look had come into the desperado's face, and a large scarlet blot on his purple shirt slowly widened. He crumpled, landing almost at Tabor's feet.

The other two—the remaining brother, and the drunken bandit—were already down, either dead or dying, for they had been caught in the deadly, close-range crossfire between Billy West, Joe Scott and Buck Foster.

Seeing that the battle was hopelessly lost, Angsdorf and Rudolph whirled their horses for a getaway. And just at this moment, as ill luck would have it, Sing Lo came rolling out of the brush near them. The Chinaman had been crawling over a boulder, in order to get in a shot, when his foot had treacherously slipped, and in falling he dropped his six-gun.

"Grab him—pick 'im up and use him for a shield in case we're followed!" Angsdorf bleated.

Rudolph acted on his chief's orders. He bent from his stirrup, seized the light Oriental by the wrist and yanked him from his feet. The momentum of the moving horse did the rest. With a yell, Sing Lo sailed through the air and was jerked up behind Rudolph. Then the two fleeing renegades roweled their horses savagely and hammered on down the canyon.

"Mistlee Billy!" Sing Lo cried plaintively. "Sonna Taba!" His voice became fainter, and finally faded away altogether.

"They've captured Sing Lo!" Billy West shouted in alarm. "The horses, quick! We've got to help him—"

They caught a brief glimpse of the escaping men, just before they vanished into another patch of scrub timber. Angsdorf was in the lead, and Sing Lo was riding behind Rudolph, effectively shielding the bandits from any gunshots from the pursuit.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" ejaculated Buck Foster, who hadn't seen how the capture had been made. "What did that fool chink want to do that for? He's always gettin' in jams! Sometimes I don't think he's got any more sense than Joe Scott!"

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## CHAPTER X.

### DEATH'S STEEPLECHASE.

SONNY TABOR whistled for his pinto bronc, and as the other horses were scattered at different points in the brush he was the first to hit the saddle. By the time he was aboard, however, the surviving bandits had nearly a half mile's start.

"I'll go on ahead, amigos!" he shouted back as he urged his speedy cayuse down the grade.

"Be careful of those mad dogs!" Billy West yelled back as he waved him on. "We'll be right behind you!"

At his master's bidding Paint took the bit in his teeth and went charging down the gulch like an Arizona dust-devil. The canyon walls whirled by in a misty blur, and the staccato rhythm of the pinto's hoofs was like the roll of drums. Paint vaulted over some of the brush clumps that barred his path, banked sharply around others, and crashed through the remainder, a little juggernaut of sleek velvety power and speed.

When Sonny next caught a glimpse of his quarry they were at the fence, and Angsdorf had jumped down to open the gate. The Arizonan was less than a quarter mile behind them now, and the bandits slipped through the opening hastily, then shut the gate behind them. They were off again in a flash.

If Rudolph and the Wild Basin judge thought that this maneuver would gain them time, they were sadly deceived. Instead of checking his speed, Sonny sent his pinto straight toward the closed gate.

"You can do it, boy," he muttered. *"Es menester que usted vaya! Vaya!"*

Paint gathered himself for a leap, then soared upward. Leather popped in protest as the pinto's steely muscles bunched and tautened. Then, grazing the top bar, the bronc sailed over to safety. Paint landed running, and pounded on, hardly missing a stride. The cayuse seemed as intent as his master to win. Maybe he realized that Death was holding the stakes.

Paint was gaining, but slowly, for Angsdorf and the judge were very well mounted and they were punishing their horses unmercifully with quirt and spur, and the animals were flecked with a bloody foam.

Sonny didn't dare shoot, for fear of accidentally killing Sing Lo—nor did he want to hit either of those poor, tormented horses. So he held his fire, knowing that in the long run Paint wouldn't fail to win.

"Sing Lo saved our lives, Paint, and we've got to do the same for him!" he muttered under his breath.

On the skyline ahead a long, black trail of smoke marked the passing of a train along the railroad, only a few miles distant. Presently the smoke ceased to move, and rose straight upward. The train had evidently stopped at the little station where Sonny had telegraphed. A minute later Sonny could see it—it was a freight train, some flatcars, and a line of box cars with a red caboose.

Angsdorf and Rudolph were headed straight toward the water-tank and depot, and their pursuer now knew what their game was. The freight would probably be halted for some little time, as it was taking on water, and the two renegades planned to abandon their horses and board the train.

Sonny looked back over his shoulder. The Circle J rannies weren't yet in sight, though distant dust heralded the fact that they were on the move.

"Faster, Paint boy," he gritted. "We can't let those skunks get away!"

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The fact that Angsdorf was a judge and a respected member of his community hadn't surprised Sonny very much, for he knew that rascals sometimes worked their way into high positions in rough frontier towns. He had thought, from the first, that there was something bogus about Angsdorf, just as Buck had said.

Rudolph and Angsdorf were only a couple of hundred yards ahead now, but they had reached the railroad and now they turned their horses sharply. Sonny lost sight of them for the moment, for the little depot cut off his view. He heard a blast from the locomotive's whistle, signifying that the freight train was almost ready to move.

Angsdorf was the first to reach the cindery depot platform, and he jumped from his lathered cayuse, still flourishing his revolver.

"Hold the train!" he yelled at a trainman who was standing at the rear of the caboose. "We're cash passengers!"

Anton Rudolph leaped from his saddle, dragging the frightened Sing Lo with him. The killer's face was twisted into a grimace of insane fury. Holding the Chinaman by the hair, he deliberately forced him to his knees in the cinders.

"We're through with you now, yeller belly!" he rasped brutally. "I'm goin' to see what color your brains are!"

He drew his six-gun with his free hand, rolled back the hammer under an expert thumb, and put the muzzle to Sing Lo's temple. The trainman gave a startled yell of horror.

At that instant Sonny Tabor appeared around the corner of the station! The bullet scar in his bronzed cheek no longer resembled a dimple; it was a deep pit in a mask of granite. The .45 in his right hand thundered.

Anton Rudolph gave a screech of agony—and dropped his unfired six-shooter, releasing Sing Lo at the same time. The Arizona outlaw's bullet had ripped through the muscles of his arm just above the elbow. It now hung, mangled and useless, a reddened ruin with shattered bones protruding.

With an oath, Rudolph staggered toward his spent cayuse, putting the animal between him and Tabor—just as Judge Angsdorf sent a shot at Sonny at a distance of three yards.

Grains of burning powder stung Sonny's face and momentarily blinded him, but the slug only grazed his neck. He fired in return, and he killed Angsdorf. The hypocrite of Wild Basin fell over backwards and rolled under a box car, his body slumping across the nearest rail.

As the train had begun to move, in response to frantic signals from the brakeman, the results were not very pleasant to see! Sonny, however, was occupied elsewhere—the fight wasn't over.

Rudolph had raked his rifle from the saddle scabbard, with his one good arm, the same high-powered weapon that had dry-gulched Slim Lowrie, and he was in the act of yanking the trigger when Sonny spun on his toes and fired.

The evil mouth of Anton Rudolph had been open to frame a yell of triumph, but the yell became a horrible death rattle. Sonny's shot took the murderer squarely between the eyes.

The long trail of justice had now ended, indeed, and all debts were paid in full.

An hour afterward, Sonny and his Circle J friends were still on the station platform, talking over the

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events of the last few days and the shape of events to come. Billy West planned to recover the cattle he had bought and paid for and make a hasty return to Circle J. That would avoid complications at Wild Basin, although they really had nothing to run away from. In spite of the terrible things that had happened that morning, all were in good spirits.

Sing Lo had babbled his thanks in rapid pidgin English, but Sonny had explained that he had only repaid him for his clever work at the jail. They could call it quits.

"Allee same flifty-flifty?" beamed the little Chinaman. "So be! Glate China philosopha say 'fliend in need is a fliend to feed' and I cook you velly fine dinna next time I see you!"

"That's a promise, Sing Lo," laughed the Arizonan, "and I hope it's soon."

Sonny Tabor had regretfully declined the Circle J pards' invitation to ride with them to their home ranch. He didn't want to get them into trouble—and he had other reasons.

Buck Foster was loudly and proudly reminding the Circle J owner of his sagacity. "Didn't I tell you, boss?" he crowed. "Help me Hannah, I warned you about that Angsdorf jasper from the very first. A slick idea of his, sellin' cattle and then stealin' 'em back to sell all over again. But I was onto him! By gannies, I knowed—" He paused to glare at the grinning Joe Scott. "You're about to say somethin', but if yuh open yore yap, yuh unweaned, pink-thatched coyotie, I'll—"

The impending argument was interrupted by the depot agent, who was coming from his tiny office with a sheet of yellow paper in his hand.

"Here's an answer to that telegram you sent," he called to Sonny Tabor. "It just now came."

Sonny's heart gave a bound. This was better than he'd hoped for; he had sent his wire in care of the governor's office in Phoenix, thinking that it might catch the addressee by some lucky chance. And it had! The wire, directed to "Mr. Johnson, Tiptop, Montana," was as follows:

SO GLAD AND RELIEVED TO HEAR AT LAST. SLIM LOWRIE FULLY RECOVERED RETURNED TO DUTY. GLAD YOU HAVE HAD SUCH QUIET REST IN MONTANA. EXPECT SEE YOU SOON. RITA.

Smiling, Sonny folded the precious yellow paper. And the Circle J waddies were wondering why he was so anxious to get back to Arizona!

THE END.

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# HARD LITTLE BUCKAROO

***When two hombres start wearin' each other's clothes for owlhootin' escapades, things get plumb mixed up!***

## by PHILIP F. DEERE

His faded blue bandanna mask seemed a joke. The rags and tatters of clothing he wore were enough to establish his identity to anyone in the county. The starved young slimness of his angular figure was clearly recognizable. And there was his lean buckskin pony and his gun. The gun was a broken old .38 owlhead; if he didn't hold it with both hands when he pulled trigger, the weapon was apt to kick open at the breech and slam the exploded cartridge back at him. But he could shoot the owlhead straight.

The pony had one "glass" eye and a dished face, and was meaner than hell. Nobody else would have had it.

"Elevate!" he barked.

Slim young Monty Rutherford pulled his fine black horse to a halt there in the chaparral-bordered cow-country road. He assumed a comfortable position in the saddle, and put his hands up lazily. Not that Monty was so brave. This pampered and spoiled lone son of the county's biggest, richest man was riding home from town a third drunk, as usual. He spoke in a distinctive, drawling whine:

"So you've turned owlhoot, have you, Hornet? I've got no dinero on me. Lost what I had in a stud game with Sinc Bender. Say, Stinger, that mask is funny. Anybody'd know who you are!"

"They would, would they?" Hor-

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net Lellman, the so-called Stinger Kid—his temper and that broken old .38 owlhead had earned the name for him just lately—spoke in a tight voice. The blue of his eyes was the blue of ice and rock. He went on instantly:

"You might know who I am, but try swearin' it in court and see what the judge says. I'm not stickin' you up for dinero. Want you to go somewhere with me. Got somethin' to tell you. Stay froze, or I'll show you what a lead pill tastes like. Remember the time when I bummed a sandwich from a town restaurant, and you got the cook to fill it chock-full of cayenne pepper? But I was so damn hungry I et it anyhow, and nearly died. Yeah, you remember. And so do I!"

Poison mean though Hornet's buckskin was, the animal always obeyed him. The horse knew what would happen if it didn't. He kneed the pony to a halt beside the black horse, and deftly plucked Monty Rutherford's handsome big six-gun from engraved buff leather.

"Ride west," crisply ordered the Stinger Kid.

Monty's now somewhat watery blue eyes saw inside the barrel of his own Colt. He reined his horse through the chaparral line and for more than an hour rode westward. Hornet Lellman kept him going fast.

He seemed a little sick when Hornet stopped him before a sun-blasted old sheepherder shanty deep in a maze of low hills dotted with juniper clumps and gashed by a thousand gullies and washes.

"Down and go inside," ordered the Stinger.

He followed Rutherford in. A parchment-skinned old Mexican who squatted at a cook pot looked around as they entered, but did not speak. Monty turned, removed his silver-pearl Stetson hat, and with a silken bandanna wiped cold perspiration from his forehead.

"What—what was it you wanted to tell me, Kid?" whined Monty.

This whine was a part of him. The Stinger clipped, "Sit down." Both dropped to empty soap boxes. Hornet Lellman began to talk:

"You know about me livin' here and yonder, with sheepherders or any sort of riffraff that'd have me, since I was a button. About me bein' kicked around from hell to breakfast and breakfast to hell, starvin', wearin' whatever clothes I could pick up—anybody knows that. But maybe you don't know the why of it. So I'll tell you.

"Monty, a long time ago my dad and yours owned a big cow outfit in New Mexico together. One day they had a ruckus. Your dad hit mine over the head with a rifle barrel. It plumb locoed Jim Lellman, my dad. After a while then, Bob Rutherford took advantage of my pa bein' crippled under the hat and bought his half of that big ranch *for thirty dollars*. It was worth thirty thousand.

"I was five years old then. My daddy took me and wandered around, an' finally came to this State. He'd prospect deserts, leavin' me with an old Mexican. My ma was dead, same as yours. Later, your dad came to this State too, and he bought the big cow spread he lives on now. Also, before long Bob Rutherford owned the stage line and most of the town bank, and a store in town.

"Well," pursued young Lellman, "when I'm fourteen, my daddy has pieced things together in his mind at last; and he tells me, and soon after that he's crossed the old dark river. I—"

Here Monty Rutherford interrupted: "How do you know what

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he told you is straight? If his mind was crippled—"

The Stinger Kid interrupted in turn:

"Went to New Mexico and made sure. Got back last week. Could get witnesses, and law your dad, yeah; but try to beat Bob Rutherford in a lawsuit! I waited until I was grown to do somethin' about it. For six years, every time I saw you, I'd think: That ought to be me; I ought to wear those fine clothes, and ride that fine hoss, and have plenty to eat, and sleep in a bed! Few hours ago, I went to old Bob Rutherford and offered to settle with him for ten thousand when he owes me fifteen. He laughed at me. Figgered he would, but I had to give him his chance.

"'Get out of here, you little tramp!' he says, and kicks me off the front gallery of his big ranch-house!"

There Stinger Kid Lellman stopped talking with tragic abruptness. He was white under his deep tan. The blue of his eyes was more than ever the blue of ice and rock. Monty Rutherford was sober enough now. He said uneasily, as he got to his feet:

"But, Hornet, you didn't have to bring me away off here to tell me that. And I still don't see why you had a mask on."

"Maybe I just wanted to get used to wearin' it," Hornet said. He, also, had risen. "Now take off them fine clothes. Underwear, everything. I want to get used to wearin' them, too. You can put on my rags. Like for you to get the feel of 'em. I'm rememberin' that cayenne pepper. Well, don't stand there gapin'—"

*Wham!* A bullet out of the handsome six-gun had bit ground near the toe of Monty's costly left boot. Monty paled and stuttered, with cold fear in his still somewhat watery blue eyes: "You—you aim to make my dad ransom me, huh? You'll n-never get by with that!"

"Do what I said!" jerked out the Stinger Kid. "Here, Grego!"

He tossed the big Colt butt first. Old Gregorio, the Mexican, caught it neatly and held it on young Rutherford. Hornet then gave Grego his broken old .38 and belt. As Monty began to undress, he stiffened himself long enough to show Lellman his teeth:

"Hard little buckaroo, huh?"

"Pronto!" said the Kid.

Both hustled. They put on each other's clothing, and Monty slumped back to his soap box. Hornet straightened in his new finery, and smiled down at it. Gregorio then returned the big Colt to Hornet. Again came Rutherford's drawling whine.

"How long do I stay here, Hornet?"

"Not so long, maybe. You'll be *mucho bueno* if you don't try to run. Remember that!"

Hornet Lellman slanted a glance at old Grego, who nodded. Hornet then hastened out to the black horse, swung up to the saddle and was gone eastward. After a few minutes, Monty Rutherford rose swearing. Another parchment-skinned sheepherder, and another, appeared as though out of nowhere at all, and each was armed. Grego took a handful of rawhide strings from a broken *olla* and mumbled in Spanish:

"The young señor will be tied if he misbehaves. The other young sheepherder *viejos* are his friends."

Monty shrugged beatenly.

## II.

It was well along in the afternoon when the Stinger Kid, so-called, rode into town. He pulled the black

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horse into an alleyway, soon had dismounted and dropped rein at the back door of the bank. Beginner's luck—only the teller was there. Hastily the Kid drew his bandanna mask up to his eyes, drew the silver-pearl Stetson hat low, and then he dashed in.

The teller stared at the threatening muzzle of the Colt and put his hands upward. With his free left hand, Hornet snatched all the bank notes in reach—most of them were in banded sheaves—and crammed them inside his shirt. Then he was backing out toward his horse, with the amazed teller calling after him:

"Thought you knew your dad owned most of this bank, Monty!"

Bob Rutherford always had given his son everything he asked for.

Hornet Lellman smiled behind his mask. It hadn't even been necessary for him to attempt an imitation of Monty's characteristic drawling whine. This, he figured, was the difficult part of his grim masquerade. Since both he and Monty were blue-eyed, and of a size and age, the rest promised to be quite simple.

He leaped to the back of the black horse and rode half a dozen miles into the northwest before he reined down. There had been no pursuit. But he had scarcely expected any. He could see grizzled Sheriff Tom Arnett blinking and gaping when the bank teller whispered the big news. Taking the bank notes from inside his shirt, the Stinger Kid counted his loot. It amounted to thirty-six hundred dollars. Couple of ranch pay rolls made up and ready, probably. Again the Stinger smiled.

"This is a part of the fifteen thousand that Rutherford owes me—but I still got some distance to go," he said aloud.

He remembered that Rutherford owned the stage line that connected the county seat with Hartsville, far to the north. He smiled grimly as he decided on another venture. A stage was due in town before night. Hornet Lellman put the money inside his shirt and turned his horse across a corner of Rutherford range, toward the stage road.

Hornet waited a long hour in a chaparral thicket. Then from off northward there came the growing clatter of hoof and wheel. Fine Stetson hat pulled low in front, mask crowding his eyes, Hornet kicked the black into the road not thirty yards from the incoming vehicle.

"Stop and elevate!" he cried, whining it. "Kick that little iron strongbox off, driver!"

The mustached old jehu swore in astonishment as he sat back on the reins. The stagecoach lurched to a halt. The jehu glared at the slim young masked figure in its now dusty finery.

"Say, look here, Monty, you musta went plumb loco all of a sudden—but this here's just a joke, ain't it?"

The Stinger Kid felt a throb of triumph. His counterfeit whine had passed muster! One shot out of the Monty gun, only a few inches above the driver's head, and the driver knew that it was no joke. The small iron box struck the ground clinking. Hornet Lellman, pleased because the black horse had not proved gun shy, pulled the animal over to the roadside and signed the vehicle to move on.

"Son, yore pappy will raise hell with you, shore!" half moaned the old man on the high seat.

Lellman hardly got that. His attention had suddenly become riveted upon one of the dusty stage win-

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dows. Inside the glass there was an apparently horror-stricken feminine face. It annoyed Lellman oddly. Women had figured in his life almost not at all, and yet—

"Get 'em up, fancy little hombre, and do it fast!"

The voice was brittle; it came from somewhere around the rear of the stagecoach, outside. This passenger, a stranger who did not know a Rutherford from sole leather, had slipped unseen from the farther door of the vehicle. Hornet Lellman caught the glint of late sunlight on gun-barrel steel. Left hand still gripping the rein, Hornet ducked out of his saddle with a bullet hole in his hat only.

He was shooting when he ducked. The other gun roared again, and the Stinger felt the sting and shock of hot lead. But it merely angered him. His big six-gun, unlike the broken old .38 owlhead, handled sweetly. Having noted that the woman inside was on the front seat, he fairly set the back end of the stage afire with the gun. The strange fighter soon had enough. He sprang back through the farther doorway, and four whipped-up horses carried him rapidly out of the Stinger's range of vision.

"That's what I call hot luck," muttered Hornet. He put a hand to the shallow wound in his right side and brought back fingertips bearing a smear of scarlet. At this he laughed.

With some difficulty he managed to get the iron box up to the front of his saddle, and mounted behind it. Then he made for the maze of low, juniper-dotted and red-gashed hills that lay off westward. Keen to know what he had in the box, he rode as fast as the heavy burden would permit.

## III.

Twilight had begun to seep upward through the gullies and washes when he dismounted among green junipers. He'd heard of bandits shooting the locks off stage strongboxes, and he shot the locks of this one. He threw the lid back. Another moment, and he was swearing.

The box was crammed tightly with scrap iron and rags!

*"Why?"*

There was a reason, he knew that, and somehow he knew that the reason was big and important. Born with more curiosity than was good for him, Hornet Lellman decided that he would get at the bottom of this. Already he had figured a simple way to go about it.

He made a leap for his saddle, and kicked the black into swift motion. Even in darkness, these hills were as an open book to him. Within half an hour's time he was dismounting before old Gregorio's shack. A pair of tallow candles burned inside.

"Here's the hard little buckaroo," whined Monty Rutherford, as Lellman rushed in. Lellman's old rags gave Monty a funny look, but his nerves seemed in good shape now. "Well, Hornet, what did my dad say about payin' ransom?"

The face of the Stinger Kid showed up a little pale in the yellow light of the tallowdips. The bullet wound in his side, which he had laughed at in the beginning, was not so comfortable at present. His gaze swept the stolid countenances of the three old sheepherders, then went back to Monty. The latter spoke again. His whine was crafty:

"You know, Hornet, I'd thought there was somethin' decent about you, range tramp though you was. The way to settle with my dad is by law—"

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"Nobody ever wanted to be decent more'n I do!" the Stinger flared up hotly. "If you believed that, what made you get the restaurant cook to feed me a sandwich loaded with cayenne pepper? You're a liar, and you know it!"

At once he went blazing on: "Go to the law to collect, huh? I once hinted to Sheriff Tom Arnett about lawsuits against your dad, and Arnett comes square out and tells me nobody can win one; said Bob Rutherford was too big and too rich. I want what was my daddy's and now is mine, and I'm takin' the only way I know to get it, and anybody who don't like it can go plumb slambang to hell—includin' you!"

He wheeled upon old Grego and continued talking, but in easier tones: "I got a lot o' old ragged clothes layin' around here. Find a sack and put some in it for me—britches and boots and shirt and hat—while I'm grabbin' me a bite to eat."

Already Hornet had spied supper leftovers on the table in a shadowy corner. He ate of the leftovers like a starving young wolf. Grego was ready with the bag when he had finished. But Hornet wasn't ready to go just yet. His wound required at least a little attention. Hornet took a rag from a nail in the shanty wall, wet it, and wiped the wound clear of blood. In order to do this he'd had to take out his bank loot. Half the greenbacks were stained red. Monty saw.

"So that was it," he broke out—"you pulled a stickup in my clothes, and they think it was me!"

"Maybe some day I'll be full even with you for that cayenne pepper you wished on my insides," coolly responded Hornet. "Old Grego here, he had to pour sheep grease into me for a week, 'count of that."

Lellman replaced the money, buttoned the fine shirt, took the clothing sack from the fingers of Gregorio, and hurried into the deepening dusk outside. Those in the shanty heard the hoofbeats of the black horse swiftly fading.

Just north of town the Stinger Kid rode into hiding among trees that crowded a turn in the creek bank. He got off the horse, tied it, and hastily changed clothing. The finery he hid under a flat rock, along with Monty's six-gun and belt, and the thirty-six hundred dollars. Then he walked hastily into town.

In rags he was once more a familiar figure along the dim main street. He poked around, eyes busy. Knots of men stood here and there around saloon doors, talking robbery. Another little group was in the stage office discussing the same thing. Still another group had come together in the office of the sheriff.

This lawman, grizzled and lank Tom Arnett, sat in his chair, with his back to desk and lamp. Before him sat the big and burly old Bob Rutherford, the mustached and sunbitten old stage driver, and the man and the woman who had been passengers on the stage when Lellman held it up. Their conversation had reached a stalemate. Nobody at all was speaking when Lellman ambled in.

Ignoring the others, he halted before the sheriff, whom he had always liked. Tom Arnett had been kind to his father, Jim Lellman; and Arnett was one of the few men he knew who did not either directly or indirectly bow to the will of big Rutherford. The Stinger asked:

"Any truth in it, Tom, this business of Monty Rutherford goin' owlhoot and robbin' the bank and stage?"

Old Rutherford's heavy face

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jerked. "Get out of here, you little tramp!" he thundered.

"Told me that same thing before, out at your ranchhouse, I seem to remember," said Hornet. He spoke quietly, but his eyes were again of the blue of ice and rock. "What did you say, Tom?"

"Looks like it's that way, son," the lawman answered. "We just can't figure it. Monty sure didn't need to do anything like that. Bob always gave him money when he wanted it. He—"

"Arnett," Bob Rutherford cut in, voice bleak with rage, "run Hornet out! I don't want him here!"

The officer shrugged and turned to the stage passenger who had shown fight during the stage stick-up. Middle-aged, this man was, and dressed well. "Mr. Bright, you say you think you hit the robber when you shot at him?"

"Saw dust jump out of his shirt when I fired the second time," answered Bright. "That little buckaroo sure did set things afire. But I got the idea that he wasn't trying to hit me, I'll say that for him. Then it came to me that I'd better just let him get away with the rags and scrap iron. Oughtn't tackled him in the first place, with my wife along, but always hated stick-up hombres. Well, the missus is tired, and I reckon we'll go to the hotel now. What time did you say the Roaring River stage leaves here in the morning?"

"Seven o'clock," Arnett told him.

With Mrs. Bright he left the sheriff's office. Bob Rutherford lumbered to his feet and stalked out after them, and a moment later the stage driver departed. Now that he was alone with the lawman, the Stinger Kid set about the business of satisfying his curiosity.

"What was that, Tom, about rags and scrap iron?"

"Why, this George Bright," Arnett said, "he'd sold a big horse outfit somewheres up north o' here for all cash, and was on his way with the money—thirty thousand—and his wife to buy a cow spread over beyond the Roaring River section. Been some stage stick-ups around Hartsville, and Rutherford had ordered his Hartsville agent not to guarantee shipments of money or valuables in the stage strongboxes.

"Well," the law officer pursued, "Bright played smart. He got the driver to stuff his box with scrap iron and rags, makin' weight enough to fool possible stick-up gents, and carried his thirty thousand in his baggage. Getting back to Monty Rutherford, Stinger—he's got me stumped. Never was worth a nickel though. His pa's money ruined him. Look, son; what the hell is old Bob mad at you about?"

After thinking hard for a moment, young Lellman said: "I've kept it to myself ever since I found out six years ago, Tom; but now I reckon I better tell you. Might come in handy for you to know, sometime."

Hornet did not, of course, breathe a word concerning his grim masquerade. When Sheriff Tom Arnett knew of Bob Rutherford's greatest single piece of stark villainy, he swore a round oath, then went on:

"No, you couldn't law Bob and get what's yours. He'd have your witnesses dry-gulched, likely. Or he'd have you dry-gulched yourself. And it'd be done so slick I probably wouldn't be able to nail a thing on anybody. Since Rutherford got to be so powerful, sheriffing here has been pure hell—for a man who takes the job serious!"

"Yeah, reckon so," muttered Hornet. If Rutherford ever had any

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qualms, they would have perished now. "Well, *buenos noches, amigo.*"

Soon Lellman was back among the creek-bank cottonwoods with the black horse. The wound in his side was giving him more and more pain, accompanied by a growing nausea. He wondered whether the bullet hole wasn't bleeding inwardly. He put the bank loot and Monty's clothing, gun and belt into the sack that he had used for carrying the old clothing to town, mounted with the sack and rode for old Gregorio's shanty home.

The Stinger Kid had become queerly dizzy when he reached the edge of the juniper-dotted hills. Rest, that was what he needed, and it was still some little distance to Grego's. He'd slept a thousand nights under the stars. Why balk at it now?

He got down at the first juniper clump and tied the black to a swinging branch. Stretching himself wearily on the ground, Hornet dropped into an uneasy sleep. At sunrise he was up, with strange fancies crowding his brain. Not far away there was a spring. Hornet drank there and bathed his wound, crawled back to the junipers and slept again.

This time he slept better, and at noon he woke, feeling almost himself once more. After having hidden the stuffed bag carefully, he climbed into the saddle and put out for Gregorio's and something to eat.

The place was oddly silent. Hornet Lellman dismounted, flung down rein, and rushed inside to find the shanty deserted. One glance through the rear doorway showed him that his mean buckskin pony was not in the little corral now. Then he saw something else that jarred him. Well off beyond the corral a lone rider was coming, and it was the lank and grizzled Sheriff Tom Arnett. Hornet knew Arnett's big gray horse.

"Trouble!" broke from the Stinger's lips.

Certainly he didn't want the officer to see Monty Rutherford's black horse. After having led the horse into the shanty and closed both doors, he hastened on foot to meet the lawman, purposely following the bank of a deep gully that would give him a chance to escape if he needed it. Arnett was now scarcely two hundred yards from the shanty.

"Hiyah, Tom," was Lellman's greeting, with a forced tight grin. "You out here on somebody's trail, maybe?"

The officer reined in. His eyes held pain and regret as genuine as pain and regret could be. "Looking for you, Kid. Happened to remember about you staying out here a good deal. You're not wearing a gun? Where's the old .38 owlhead you used to trade-mark Stetsons with?"

"Looks like I've lost it. Didn't see it on me last night, did you? How come you on my trail, Tom?"

"You're charged with robbing the Roaring River stage this morning to the tune of thirty thousand dollars," said Arnett, voice pinched. "I can see your reason, but you made a big mistake. Bob Rutherford owns no part of that stage line, and is not responsible for a cent of the thirty thousand. The money was in the strongbox this time, and the Roaring River stage outfit is responsible, but the outfit is bankrupt, so George Bright himself will have to stand the loss if we don't find the money. Where'd you hide it?"

Hornet Lellman saw it all before Arnett had finished speaking. Monty Rutherford somehow had managed to escape the sheepherder *viejos* and

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had turned the tables with a terrific vengeance. In the Stinger's rags, with the Stinger's pony and gun and a faded bandanna mask, young Rutherford had pulled a big stick-up. Lellman would go to prison for twenty years, if he were caught and couldn't establish his innocence!

"Sure I done that, Tom?" he asked narrowly.

"The driver and a couple townsmen passengers recognized you, Kid. Recognized that clippy way of talking you've got. Put these on, Kid."

Monty had even aped Hornet's speech—just as Hornet had aped Monty's whine! A shining set of manacles fell to the ground at the feet of the accused.

"All right," drawled Lellman. He bent as though to pick the manacles up, and dove into the nearby deep gully.

Tom Arnett ordered Lellman to halt, jerked his gun, and rode to the gully's edge. His man was just disappearing around a jutting boulder. Arnett spurred his horse down the gully bank. The Stinger Kid whipped back and ran like a buck deer until he had turned a curve, then climbed out hastily and lost himself in a wide line of scrub. When the sheriff's fruitless hunt had taken him a safe distance from Grego's shack, Hornet made good his escape on the Rutherford black.

Well, he told himself, it was the owlhoot for him from now on. Looked that way, anyhow. But not in rags. He rode a half-circle for the point at which he had, the night before, hidden his thirty-six hundred dollars of bank loot, Monty's clothing and gun belt.

After he'd put on the finery, he buckled on the big Colt and rode fast for the Roaring River section. He would find Monty, if he could, and rob him. Thirty thousand dollars!

"If I have the blame," he said to the black horse, "I want the game, too."

## IV.

Finding Monty in the rugged terrain would have proven quite difficult, had there been only Monty. Half a dozen armed and mounted men, led by George Bright, were following the trail of the stage robber. Lellman saw the party first, and understood. The party was moving too slowly. Hornet Lellman rode on ahead. From a rocky pinnacle he saw at last a lone slim figure in rags, on a buckskin pony, emerge from thick brush and turn into a creek to lose trail.

Hornet's gaze switched back to the pursuers. Suddenly he sat up straight in his saddle with an oath. Among the pursuers was old Bob Rutherford!

"Hell-bent on seein' that my hide *is* nailed to the big jail-house door, savin' hisself some money!" barked the Stinger into the hot silence.

It was then that he got his great idea.

He rode fast to overtake Monty Rutherford, and soon had done it. Monty had shot the strongbox locks and the big loot bulged his ragged shirt. Red-faced, he snarled at the slender form in his own expensive clothes—he'd have been safe, had not Lellman bobbed up—and reached for the old .38 owlhead.

"Don't make me drill you," said Lellman quickly, big Colt leveled. He took the owlhead from Monty and threw it away, went on with a tiny hard smile: "Better rider than I thought. Wonder that mean buckskin didn't throw you."

"Hell, he did!" blurted Monty.

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"Every mile or so. Hadn't been for that, I'd been twenty miles from here. I'm safe now, though, if—"

"Ride back with me," cut in Hornet. "We'll see how safe you are."

"But they want you too!" blazed the perspiring Monty. "In my clothes and on my horse, it'll be a dead giveaway for you!"

The Kid made no answer to this. "Come on, or I'll bash you across the head and take you!" was what he said.

Twenty minutes later the two were in hiding behind a boulder on the lip of a rocky ravine. In the ravine bottom, Monty's pursuers moved along slowly. Lellman called down:

"Bob Rutherford, you and George Bright—nobody else—walk up here. I've found your big dinero, Mr. Bright."

Young Rutherford swore helplessly. Those on the trail below had stopped. Soon the two men whom Lellman had addressed were dismounting to walk up the rocky slope. Hornet and Monty also were on foot now.

As the pair of elderly men came around a corner of the boulder, the Stinger indicated his blood-sweating companion and said, "Here's your stick-up gent. See the dinero bulgin' his shirt? And right back there's the buckskin pony he rode."

Old Rutherford glared at his son in rags. Then he glared at the expensive clothing on the Stinger Kid. "It was you, Hornet," he gasped, "that . . . that held up my bank and stage yesterday!"

"Yeah," admitted Hornet, blue eyes as cold and as hard as ice and rock. "Monty and me, we can go to State prison together. I could have me a high time with Monty—maybe I'd feed him cayenne pepper! Wait a minute, though. Might be some other way. You, Mr. Bright—I'm bettin' you're a big man and not crooked like Bob Rutherford there. I'll tell you everything, and we'll see what you think."

He told it fast. Bright frowned, turned to Rutherford.

"He's got you, Rutherford. Your son is caught dead to rights, and I'll see that you don't pull any funny stuff with the law. We'd better settle this out of court, is what Hornet means. I get my money back, you pay the Kid the rest of the fifteen thousand that you owe him—for I sure believe he told the truth—and we see that no law charges are preferred against anybody. Or, would you rather have your lone son go to prison with the Kid, Rutherford?"

"Guess I'm licked," said old Bob, voice weak.

Relief showed in Monty's thin smile. He turned his gaze upon the Stinger, so-called, and his lips shaped words, but none came. He, too, was licked—and he knew it.

THE END.

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# BUFFALO BILL'S ONE SHOT

THE Sioux had been attacking settlers along the Republican River; and General Carr, in command at Fort McPherson, set out to stop the trouble, his chief scout being W. F. Cody, Buffalo Bill. With two companies of Pawnees, and two of cavalry, Major North made a scout to the north of the river. They encamped on the Black Deer Trail Fork, and in a short time, a band of Indians appeared, dashing over the prairie at full speed, yelling and waving their lances. At first they were thought to be Sioux, but Major North's officers noticed that their own Pawnees made no hostile movement, but began to sing and yell in unison with the approaching Indians, and proved to be members of the company.

When they dashed into camp it was soon learned that they had met up with a party of Sioux that was following an Indian trail. They had evidently been in a fight, for they had some wounded warriors with them. On hearing this news, General Carr set out as soon as possible to take up the trail of the Sioux. As they rode, they passed a number of campfires, so they knew they were gaining on them.

General Carr selected all the best horses that could stand a hard and long run; and Chief Scout Cody picked out some of the most dependable scouting Pawnees to go in advance of the command, so that they could send word to the troops before they were seen by the Indians. After a long search, the scouts discovered them encamped south of the Platte River at Summit Springs. Here Cody left the Pawnee scouts, and rode back to tell General Carr that the Sioux were in sight. Soon the whole command was in a state of excitement, everyone eager to get into the fight.

The next day, a large band of Sioux was seen near the Platte. The redmen discovered the pursuers at the same time, and began to circle them to find out their full strength, but keeping out of rifle range. Seeing a remarkably fine Indian, well-mounted, and riding at the head of a squad, Buffalo Bill concluded that he must be a chief, and decided to take a chance at dismounting him. To accomplish this, he left his saddle and crawled on hands and knees up the ravine, stopping when he thought he was within range.

The Indians slackened speed to cross the ravine, and Cody rose up and fired. His aim was so sure that the chief tumbled to the ground. His horse ran toward the soldiers, one of whom rode out and caught the lariat attached to the bridle, thus securing the fallen chief's fine mount. By general consent, the horse was given to Buffalo Bill, who had killed its rider with one shot at a range of four hundred yards, which was a great feat.

The chief proved to be Tall Bull, one of the most capable and popular chiefs the Sioux ever had. They were so grieved at his death that they retreated at once, without making any attempt to start a battle.



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# RIDE ON, Cowboy!

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

***When trouble hit Andy Irons, he had plenty irons in the fire—and a couple in his hands!***

## CHAPTER I.

### NO TRESPASSING.

HIDDEN in a patch of jack pines above a mountain clearing containing a fire-scorched cabin and the charred remains of a haystack, Andy Irons slowly cocked his rifle. His partner, Ed Payton, had been shot down like a yellow dog, in that clearing, only a few days before. Andy had come from the Chugwater range to avenge Ed's death.

Ed and young Irons had ridden and fought and worked together for years in the southern Wyoming

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roundups. They had pooled their wages until savings had grown strong enough for Ed to ride forth hunting a location where the two saddle pards could launch a small cattle business.

Now, the fire-scorched cabin, a freshly filled grave down in Powder Bend, and the burned haystack represented the bitter end of their partnership. Nothing remained but to discover the man who had shot Ed on the threshold of that cabin and kill or capture him.

Slanting down the grassy divide from Andy's hiding place toward the small stream in the rear of Ed's cabin ran a rusty wire drift fence. Andy saw that it served as a southern boundary for the homestead. From the lower strand of wire flapped a wooden sign bearing the printed warning:

RIDE ON, COWBOY!

It was signed, Bill McCloud. And this same McCloud, so Andy had learned at the county seat, was a raiser of blooded horses, an enemy of Ed Payton, and charged with the murder because the dead homesteader and the horseman had clashed over land rights on Blue Creek. Furthermore, Bill McCloud had lost a bunch of Morgan-bred stuff and had accused Payton of the theft.

The evidence linking McCloud with the murder, as shown to Andy by the sheriff, the night before when he had hit the county seat on a horse worn to a whisper by the three-hundred-mile ride from Chugwater, consisted of two .50 caliber bullets of the sort fired from a Sharps carbine.

One slug had been extracted by the Powder Bend coroner from Ed's dead body. The second had been discovered imbedded in the door frame of the cabin.

It was known that old Bill McCloud owned the only old Sharps buffalo gun in Powder Bend County. They had therefore charged him with murder. And he had fled to the hills for protection.

But Andy had met two men in Powder Bend, both experts on Blue Creek trails. They had tipped him off that this day upon which he lay in the jack pines, McCloud would surely appear on the land of the enemy he was charged with killing.

These men, who had declared they were motivated only by thoughts of justice and because they were brother cattlemen and had sympathized with Ed in his fight against McCloud, had guided Andy up the tough mountain trails. And now—with their horses staked out in cover behind the ridge—they were prepared to open fire the moment old McCloud broke cover.

Andy Irons was a lean, lanky youth with a hard jutting jaw and gimlet gray eyes. He hadn't ridden most of his life on Western roundups for nothing. Although he appreciated the aid which had been tendered him by Smiley Dagen, a Blue Creek homesteader, and young Lafe Fangler, owner of the big Seven Circle outfit, Andy told himself that the set-up was entirely too complete for comfort.

Though McCloud had fought with Payton, it didn't seem possible that the old horseman would use a gun so well-known as the Sharps to commit murder.

Further—and this stuck in Andy's tough mind—neither Smiley Dagen nor bold-eyed Lafe Fangler had explained to him where they had received the tip that McCloud would appear this morning at the scene of the murder.

The wooden sign, rattling in the wind, stirred his anger. Plainly enough, McCloud had hung it there

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ANDY IRONS

to indicate that this fence divided his range from Payton's claim.

"The old fool!" Andy muttered. "Maybe he did go hog-wild when his hosses was stole, grabbed a gun, rode down here, called out Ed, and shot him down without mercy. Maybe when he started out, he didn't figure on a killing. The impulse just seized him."

Many murders, Andy knew, weren't carefully planned. Many killers had stretched a rope or gone to the pen for committing murder in a heady gust of rage. Given time for cool thinking, a life would not have been wiped out.

To Andy's mind, the evidence of a well-known gun appeared a trifle too complete against McCloud, the law looked upon the finding of the Sharps bullets and the further motive of the land row as clinching the case against the old horseman.

From willow brush along the stream in the rear of the cabin, a rider suddenly broke cover. He was topping a roan pony. He cantered toward the shack. He was two hundred yards away Andy estimated, an easy shot for the young puncher who had downed many a fat buck deer with his saddle gun.

The Chugwater pilgrim heard Smiley Dagen's harsh whisper from his left flank:

"There's McCloud, the damn killer! We brought you here for this shot. Now—give it to him."

From the right Lafe Fangler joined in eagerly:

"Hurry up, Irons! He's a spooky old coot. He may wise up and get away."

McCloud was outlawed. The law swore by its warrants he had shot down Ed Payton without mercy.

"Why don't you shoot?" Smiley Dagen whispered again from the nearby patch of brush in which he was hiding. "Go on and shoot."

"You rode three hundred miles for this shot. Go ahead!" urged Fangler.

But Andy Irons was first and last a cowpuncher. And the first rule of the clan read that every man is entitled to his day in court. You might hate a man, but you didn't cut him down without warning. You gave him a chance to speak his piece.

Andy slowly raised his rifle. "I'll holler to McCloud to put up his hands," he said. "I've got him covered. He hasn't got a chance."

But as his front sight covered the old man the rifle aimed by Smiley Dagen cracked from the brush.

Dagen had beaten Andy to the first shot. He hadn't waited for the call to McCloud to surrender. But in his eagerness to kill, Smiley Dagen had not held a true line. His first slug cut up the sod a foot ahead of the roan's nose.

Andy saw old McCloud lean forward in leather, reach for a rifle slung from the saddle in a deerskin sheath. But before the horseman could free the weapon, Fangler

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snapped a shot, and McCloud pitched off his mount.

The roan whirled on its hind legs and stampeded back into the creek brush while its late rider lay sprawled on the ground.

Then a second rider shot suddenly into sight from the rear of the cabin. And Andy Irons saw long yellow braids of hair snapping behind this rider's head.

A girl had bought into the game!

The yellow-haired girl, checking her snorting pony, slid from leather. Her riding skirt flapped in the brisk wind as she knelt beside McCloud. She was carrying a light rifle. And at bay over the body of the unhorsed man, she turned the gun on the cover up the slope and snapped out bullets with a rattling precision.

Andy, emerging from the jack pines, heard one whine overhead. She had fired to warn, not kill, he believed. But he was taking no chances on an enraged woman.

He saw Lafe Fangler duck behind the shelter of a moss-covered log which lay a few yards down the hill from the jack pines.

Since it didn't run in Andy Irons' code to shoot down a man without warning nor battle with a woman, old or young, he, too, darted toward the log. He hit the grit on his stomach.

"You didn't tell me you expected the old man to meet a girl here," he panted to Fangler as he thrust his rifle barrel over the impromtu barricade.

Lafe Fangler turned a pair of cold blue eyes upon the Chugwater avenger. This Fangler was a full-fleshed, bull-necked, handsome sort of cowman, prosperous in looks because he wore chaps with dollar conchas and handmade boots from Texas.

"We brought you here, pilgrim," he snarled. "We offered you the chance to kill the skunk that murdered yore pard. You turned *yaller*. Now looks like *we* got to bring in both the man and the gal."

"Who is she?"

Fangler grinned, showing a line of slick white teeth behind full red lips.

"Terry McCloud, the old man's daughter. But tough as all get-out from livin' in the hills herdin' hosses. And fast with a gun."

A bullet zipped across the top of the log throwing high a shower of rotted wood where the big black ants had run their galleries. Andy and Fangler flattened out on the damp grass. The girl *could* shoot straight.

Then pony hoofs boomed on the meadow land. And Andy heard a hoarse triumphant shout. He looked over the top of the log. He saw Smiley Dagen spurring his buckskin pony straight toward the girl from the cover of the brush along the creek. The man was not ten jumps distant. He had circled down into the brushy creek valley with his mount and completely surprised Terry McCloud while she kept her eyes on the attackers in the timber.

There wasn't a chance for her, Andy saw, if she refused to drop her gun and surrender to Smiley Dagen. But the girl leaped to her boots, straightened her lithe, slim figure, and dauntlessly faced the charge of Smiley Dagen.

The girl hadn't a chance in the world. Smiley Dagen knew that. She couldn't line her rifle swiftly enough to check his drive before his pony's sharp hoofs trampled her father.

One man held the power to save the McClouds.

That was Andy Irons. In so doing, he would join forces with the suspected killer of his partner.

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TERRY McCLOUD

Plenty of men on the range would class him as a turncoat.

Andy acted as he saw Lafe Fangler whoop in triumph, straddle the log, then start lumbering down the grassy slope.

Fangler, hearing the thud of his pursuer's boots, swung about to meet the attack. He pitched up his gun.

"You double-crosser!" Fangler snarled.

Holding his rifle by the small of the stock, Andy slapped down Fangler, striking the Seven Circle cowman just above the right ear with the steel barrel. Fangler dropped as if he had been shot.

Pivoting, Andy threw a bullet that snapped between the pink nose of Smiley Dagen's big buckskin and the gallant girl crouching over the old man upon the sod.

The bullet cracked like a whip. The buckskin, startled, laid back its ears and jumped to the side. Dagen was pitched up on the horn. Cursing, he sought to force the pony ahead with his spurs.

But Andy fired a second shot that whistled past the head of the horse and sent it pitching wildly into the brush that covered the creek bank.

And upon the heels of the rattling echo of the report, Andy galloped down the hill to the girl's aid.

As he shouldered old McCloud, he noted a red drip from the horseman's right arm.

"The brutes!" sobbed Terry McCloud. "They've killed dad!"

"Not yet!" grunted Andy Irons, staggering toward the fire-scorched cabin. "He's alive. Come on! This shack ain't much, but it'll serve for a stand-off."

## CHAPTER II.

### BURNED UP.

LEAN cowpuncher and pale girl confronted each other inside the cabin. They knew from the occasional snap of bullets into the door that they were trapped. Fangler had regained his wits, picked himself off the slope where Andy had dropped him, slid like a wounded wolf back into the jack pines.

"It's Fangler," Andy said gloomily, "who's firin' from the front. What's becomes of Smiley Dagen I wouldn't know."

"Dagen," the girl whispered in a bitter voice. "He double-crossed my dad."

Andy glanced toward the rear of the cabin where they had placed old McCloud on the dirt floor a quarter hour ago after gaining the cabin. They'd bound up the bullet wound in his upper right arm with Terry's neck scarf. The sufferer, feverish from pain and bullet shock, rested on the floor because the bunk formerly used by Ed Payton was a charred and blackened wreck.

"Why should Dagen double-cross you McClouds?" Andy asked.

This was the first time in fifteen minutes that they had found time

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for talk. Gaining the shack, they had worked like beavers barricading the door with remnants of half-burned furniture while Fangler's rifle snapped slugs from the timber.

The girl gave Andy a straight, hard look with her blue eyes. He thought that she would be a mighty pretty lass in a flouncy pink gown and a picture hat. But at this moment, arrayed in dusty riding garments and gripping a rifle, she didn't look so danged beautiful. Besides, she was a McCloud, one of the clan suspected of having ambushed Payton.

"I don't know how come you on the posse," Terry said. "You look like a pilgrim to me."

"You're right. My name's Irons. Come from the Chugwater. No reason to travel a false trail. I come up here to git the hound who murdered my pard—Ed Payton. They told me"—Andy pointed toward old Bill's sprawled figure—"he was the man. They about proved it by showin' me two slugs from a buffalo gun."

Terry's eyes flashed. "So you accepted that as full proof and helped kill him from ambush."

"He ain't dead."

"Well, he's suffering. I suppose I should thank you for saving me from Dagen and Fangler. But—"

"Save your thanks," Andy said briefly. "I've lined out my trail, ma'am. I did come up here to help arrest yore dad. But I wouldn't kill any man without warnin'. And I don't like to mix up women in my range battles. So when I see you pop up—for some reason I can't figure—I did what any man would do. I give you a lift. I expect no thanks."

*Whang!* They heard the crash of Fangler's rifle from the knot of pines, listened to the thump of the heavy bullet into the barricaded door.

The girl walked to where her father lay groaning on a few miserable rags on the hard dirt floor. McCloud was out of his head, suffering from his wound and bullet shock, muttering as he tossed and rolled about.

Andy noted the old man's beard was gray and that his silvery white hair rolled almost to his collar. Certainly McCloud didn't look like a man who would ambush a fellow like Ed Payton.

"Poor dad," Terry murmured. "Forty years you lived an honorable life in these hills asking only room to run your horses. But now the law chases you like a coyote. And a man who should know better swallows the lies of Dagen and Fangler like a school kid gulps down chocolate candy."

Andy flushed angrily.

"Lots of good men have gone hog-wild fightin' over range. Everything about this place indicates a hog-wild killer. Any man would know a cabin of fresh logs wouldn't burn. But the killer was so mad he burned Ed's bunk and even tried hard to burn down the cabin. He even burned down a stack of hay. What for? Why should he burn good hay that hosses need bad 'way up here, unless he had gone hog-wild with rage."

But he added grimly, "Lucky these logs were so sappy they wouldn't burn. Or the sheriff wouldn't have found that Sharps bullet stuck in the door frame that checked with the one extracted from Ed's body."

Terry flamed. "My dad wouldn't be fool enough to use a well-known gun like an old single-shot carbine to commit a murder. Dad valued that Sharps, for he fought Indians with it. But he hadn't used it for years. Too much trouble to hand-load cartridges."

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"A Sharps killed Payton."

"But our Sharps was stolen from our house two weeks ago."

Andy's eyes widened. He walked toward Terry, and she flinched from him, frightened at the sudden tense grim look on his face.

"Somebody stole your gun. A single-shot gun. Who could steal it?"

"Plenty of riders visited our place."

Andy stood frowning, scratching his head as he took another survey of the cabin.

"Why did your paw hate Ed Payton?" he asked. "On account of land trouble."

"Dad got sore when Ed took up this homestead, but not sore enough to kill him. No, dad really got good and mad when a bunch of his Morgan horses was stolen and he found their tracks down Blue Creek just below this cabin. He accused Payton of stealing or helping to steal them, because of the land trouble. Those horses were like pets and worth two hundred dollars a head."

"He got so sore he hung a sign on his fence warning cowboys to ride on?"

But Terry blushed. "No. I put the sign on the fence when a certain cowboy I didn't admire got a trifle too bold."

"Was it Ed Payton?"

"No. I only saw Payton once in my life."

"Who then?"

"A man who'd like to win control of the whole Blue Creek valley for his cattle, freeze out small horsemen like my father. But he must control this Payton homestead and our ranch to gain that control. And I suppose he thinks I should be thrown in to boot."

"Tell me this man's name."

She tossed her head. "My business, pilgrim. Let's get back to talk of murder, if you please."

Andy's lean face broke into a grin that died almost as swiftly as it had arisen. Still for the moment it made his sunburned face almost handsome. Then again he was the stern avenger of a murdered partner, looking straight into a girl's defiant blue eyes, quizzing her sharply, for a little idea had commenced to take shape in the section of brain where ideas sprout.

"Murder," he murmured, and he hitched up his gun belt. "Yeah, murder."

He walked about the room whistling between his teeth while the girl watched him. He kicked his boot toes absently into the hard dirt floor. He examined the burned bunk. He peered out a dusty rear window. Then he knelt and began pawing away the burned remnants of hay and ticking that had made up the bed from which Ed Payton had arisen at a murderer's call.

Then Andy spoke over his bent shoulder to the girl while he cleared away debris from the dirt floor, beneath the bunk.

"Ma'am," he began.

She said impatiently. "For Heaven's sake, don't be so *polite*. Call me Terry. Friend or enemy, they all call me Terry here on Blue Creek. Even hoss thieves like your dead friend called me Terry while they was laughin' in my eyes, and in their heads, plannin' to steal fifteen head of Morgan broncs worth two hundred dollars a head."

Andy sprang up, faced her with fury in his eyes.

"You can't call a dead man a hoss thief!"

"He stole those horses!" she ripped back. "We found the tracks of the bunch just down the creek where he had held them overnight in a

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brushy bend. It was that which put dad on the fight. And *if* he killed Payton, he shot him for stealin' hosses. And that's a justifiable execution west of the Big Mud. Take it or leave it, pilgrim. And yore dirty ambushin' pals, Dagen, and Fangler."

As they faced each other, both so stormy with anger that they choked on the angry words and threats that passed their lips, old Bill McCloud propped his body up on a feeble left arm and moaned a plea:

"Water! I'm burnin' up! Water!"

Nothing so cools hot rage as the voice of suffering. The puncher, the girl, both swung and looked toward McCloud, gazed upon that seamed and bearded face now contorted with agony, upon eyes bulging from their sockets, red-rimmed staring eyes, upon lips blue and quivering, and as they gazed they heard again that fluttering strangled voice.

"Water! What have I ever done? Water! Then a shriek as Bill fell back senseless, a shrill scream for water.

The girl leaped toward the front of the cabin where a tin pail sat on a rock. It had been empty for days. She couldn't reach the creek by going through the front door. She knew that well enough. Fangler's rifle covered that door.

White to the lips, she turned to Andy Irons.

"Get out of my way. I'm going to bust the glass out of that rear window. I'm going to the creek for water. If any man tries to stop me, I'll *kill* him."

He kicked away the charred remnants of the bunk. He braced his big shoulders against the wall under the window. He answered the girl.

"Dagen's down on the creek. You got no more show with him than a mouse with a rattlesnake."

**SMILEY DAGEN and LAFE FANGLER**

"Get out of my way or I fire!"

And the girl half raised her rifle.

Andy wouldn't move. He smiled slowly, a grin without any mirth in it. His eyes were dark now and watchful. He said quietly:

"Don't be a fool, Terry. It wouldn't help your dad any. Give me that pail. I'll make a try for the water. The yard where they burned down the haystack—it's between this house and the crick. I figure I can make it at the end of the first lap. Creek the second. If I meet Dagen—"

"He'll kill you," she said. "He thinks you are yellow because you saved my life."

"You said Dagen was a double-crosser."

"Yes. I meant it. It was Dagen warned my dad the sheriff was after him for your pard's murder. Then I reckon Dagen sold out to you and Fangler."

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"What's Fangler's interest in this thing? The control of Blue Creek?"

She flushed and he knew then he had discovered the cowman who had caused a sign to be hung on a drift fence. Lafe Fangler.

Andy half turned and with his six-gun butt broke away the window-panes. The opening, he saw would be a narrow fit for his shoulders, but he could make it. Ten yards back of the shack he could see the black fluffy ashes where the killer had burned up Payton's hay. Then on another ten yards to the waterhole where perhaps Smiley Dagen was mounting guard.

The girl resisted when Andy took away the bucket, but he brushed aside her rifle.

"Your father needs you," he said gently. "Stay with him. Don't give up this fort. You got your rifle. You can hold it forever. There'll be a deputy sheriff out here today from Powder Bend. I left word at the office when I rode away. Stay on guard."

Stripped of chaps, spurs, sagging gun belt, any weight that would cut down speed, Andy stood by the window. He gripped the bucket in one hand, his six-gun in the other.

"If I'm gone too long," he said, "don't get spooked up and surrender. Hold this cabin until the law comes from Powder Bend. Then show 'em what I would consider as new evidence in this murder case."

"New evidence?"

"Ed Payton wasn't shot on the threshold. He was shot to death as he lay asleep in his bunk. Then they burned the bunk mattress and beddin' to hide the bloodstains."

"But that bullet they dug out of the door frame, that matched the one taken from Ed's body?"

Andy smiled upon the wondering girl.

"A man survives on the cow range by usin' the few brains the good Lord give him. You said yore dad wasn't fool enough to kill Ed with a well-known gun. Well, when you mentioned it was a single-shot, I figured Ed wouldn't be fool enough to stand on his doorstep and git shot at twice with a single-shot gun. No, they fired the second shot into the doorway just to cinch the killin' on yore dad. After they killed Ed in his bunk, they dragged his body outside. All this burnin' was done to cover up the scene of the crime—the bunk. Only thing I still can't figure is why they touched off that hay. No use in that."

"How do you know Ed was killed in his bunk?"

"This dirt floor's hard as cement. Fireproof, too. Some of the blood dripped down on the floor under the bunk after they shot Ed. They set fire to the mattress and blankets. The ashes fell down and hid the spots on the floor. Reckon they didn't think about those ashes hidin' the spots. But I got inquisitive and begin pawin' around when you mentioned that the gun was a single-shot. Seein' as my pard nor yore dad weren't fools."

"And neither are *you*, pilgrim!" the girl cried out as he hoisted his tall form through the window.

He grinned as he dropped into the rye grass growing outside the cabin, rye grass with its top stems scorched off from the heat that had scorched the cabin's sappy walls. He paused a moment, listening for signs of the enemy. He heard from the pines up on the hill the crash of Fangler's rifle.

"The skunk," muttered Andy. "Baitin' an ambush with a girl."

Then cheered by the brisk crack of Terry's rifle from the front window of the cabin, Andy seized the

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water pail and headed for the blackened remains of the haystack.

As he dived under the rusty stackyard fence, a gunman snaked around the edge of the charred heap. The soot had blackened his face, but Andy, bouncing to his knees, throwing his gun forward for a quick shot, recognized Smiley Dagen.

"You double-crosser!" snarled Dagen, and cracked out a shot.

But as he fired, Andy hurled the water bucket. It crashed against Dagen's lined gun, knocked the barrel aside as Dagen let the hammer fly. The ball whizzed past Andy's head as he leaped toward his enemy.

Dagen, up on his boots now, grappled with Andy. The two men tripped and plunged into the black ashes of the burned hay. There they writhed and struggled, each seeking to use his gun. Dagen banged Andy's right wrist with the barrel of his Colt and Andy lost his Colt.

But his left hand clawing about for anything that would serve as a weapon encountered a rod of iron, a twisted misshapen thing hidden in the black ashes. He supposed it must be an old tooth from a hayrake or a rusted wagon endgate rod. He didn't know or care what it might be. It would save his life. Raising it, he struck Dagen over the head as the latter sought again to fire a killing bullet.

They were both as black as the ace of spades from the ashes, fighting like mad range bulls, Dagen striving always to use his smoking gun, Andy warding off the man's pistol with the bent rod he gripped. They heard the shrill scream of Terry McCloud, but they dared not look toward the cabin. The first man who made an unwary move would die. So they crashed back through high grass and brush, then plunged over the low bank into the hip-deep icy water of a beaver-dam pool.

They were locked in struggle there when a command rang out from the creek bank.

"Irons, put up yore hands! The game's up!"

Over his soaked shoulder, Andy saw grinning Lafe Fangler standing on the bank with a gun aimed in his direction. Beside the Seven Circle boss stood weeping Terry McCloud.

Andy dropped away from Smiley Dagen who immediately ducked his head into the creek and began to wash the black soot off his sharply cut features, off a long thin face marked with a scar down the left cheek which had drawn up one corner of Dagen's mouth and endowed him with a perpetual grin.

Andy said scornfully to the girl. "So your nerve wouldn't hold out?"

"Fangler told me that Smiley had you down in the creek and was killing you," she said bitterly. "The McClouds don't ask anybody to die for them. Least of all, friends of Ed Payton. So I surrendered when Fangler agreed that he'd save your life and let you go back to the range you come from."

Andy drawled. "The trouble is I don't aim to go back until I finish my business here."

"Which is?" asked smiling Lafe Fangler.

"The killing of the killer of Ed Payton, Fangler."

## CHAPTER III.

### THE IRON BAR.

ON the bank, Andy faced Fangler. His right wrist had been numbed in the fight, and he had lost his gun. But he still gripped the twisted iron bar which he had bent over Dagen's thick head.

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"The killer of yore pard," Fangler drawled, "is back there in the shack yellin' for water. But you turned coyote. You fell for a pair of purty blue eyes. You didn't really want old McCloud."

"Not the way you and Dagen wanted him—cold meat in an ambush. And another thing, Fangler, since you faked this girl into surrenderin' to save my life, be white man enough to give old McCloud some water."

Fangler scowled. "Let the old fool walk to the crick for it," he said coarsely.

At that, Terry sprang at him like a wild cat.

"You brute!" she screamed.

Her slim form covered Fangler's line of fire on Andy. He bunched his muscles to launch an attack using the twisted iron bar. But as he teetered on his soggy boots, he felt the muzzle of a gun pressing against his backbone and heard the harsh command of Dagen.

"Stand hitched, pilgrim!"

Fangler warded off Terry's attack by gathering the girl up in his arms. His cheeks bore long red scratches where she had clawed him, but the Seven Circle owner's bulging blue eyes gleamed with admiration.

"My," he whispered, "you're shore a purty leetle varmint. Reckon I've changed my mind complete. Act nice to me, and maybe me and Smiley will turn yore old man loose on the range. After all, he did nothin' but kill a hoss thief."

"You'll pay for callin' my pard a hoss thief, Fangler!" snapped Andy.

Fangler laughed, looking over Terry's trembling shoulder as he held the girl clutched in his arms.

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"You won't collect, pilgrim. You won't live long enough. In two jerks Smiley'll put a slug through yore back. If yo're a prayin' man, you better git down on yore knees."

They didn't fear Andy, because his right hand was, for the moment, useless. And they regarded the iron bar with disdain when matched against Colt .45s.

"Before I start prayin', Fangler," Andy said slowly, "I'd like to know how you got tipped off old McCloud would meet his daughter here."

Fangler laughed. "Lots of things you'd like to know."

But the girl, breaking away from his embrace, cried out: "I know this. I found a note last night under our front door where it had been pushed in. It was in dad's handwriting and he asked me to come here with grub and ammunition this morning. Who put the note there, I don't know."

"You spoke about Smiley Dagen posing as your father's friend," Andy said levelly. "Maybe Dagen was playing both the law and the outlaw for suckers."

Now Smiley Dagen, wearing his never failing grin, circled around

*A command rang from the creek bank: "Irons, put up yore hands! The game's up!"*

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Andy and jabbed his gun into the pilgrim's stomach.

"Why don't you go into the cabin and ask old Bill?" he sneered.

"Old Bill can't talk. He's out of his head because you dirty skunks ambushed him."

That aroused Dagen, and he showed his teeth and almost slid his thumb off the cocked gun hammer.

But a shout from the corner of the cabin caused Dagen's eyes to flick about. Even Fangler and the girl pivoted.

There stood old McCloud, wild-eyed with a desire for water to cool his fever. He tottered on his legs. He carried the girl's light rifle braced under his left arm and had tightened his finger on the trigger. He was too weak to fight and only delirium had forced him from the cabin.

"Water!" he croaked, and moved blindly toward the group of staring people on the creek bank.

Andy Iron's range-trained wits put fire and strength into his weary body. His right hand was useless. But he held the iron bar in his left. He ran grave chances of stopping Dagen's bullet with his brisket. But he took the chance. He snapped the end of the bar around as Dagen turned his head to look toward old Bill. And he knocked Dagen to his knees.

The six-gun fell from Dagen's hand, and he pawed the dirt for it. Andy leaped upon the gunman's back. They fought. Fangler, coming in to kill Andy, was struck by the flying body of Terry McCloud. He reeled off his boots, then turned upon her.

A shot crashed. Old McCloud, still seeking water, had tripped off his rifle.

The bullet tore between Fangler and the girl who fought now with yellow hair in wild disarray, blue eyes wide and desperate.

Fangler, showing the yellow streak as McCloud fired, ducked toward the cover of the cabin where he could hide safely and slam bullets.

Dagen sprawled on the ground, half dazed by the blow that Andy had dealt him, but still stubbornly grasping his gun.

There was no time to secure Dagen's weapon. Andy leaped away from the fallen gunman. McCloud was tottering past him. The girl had dropped to her knees a few feet distant. Fangler had taken cover around the corner of the shack.

Andy shoved old McCloud over the creek bank and the horseman fell flat on the sandy margin of the stream and began to lap up cold water like a dog.

"Come on!" Andy shouted to Terry. "Head for the creek!"

She struggled to her feet, wavered toward Andy.

Fangler, wildly excited now, let fly a six-gun bullet. Whether he fired at the girl or Andy, the latter never knew. For Andy leaped forward, picked up the girl, and scrambled around a corner of the black remains of the haystack. He still gripped the iron bar which had served as a weapon.

Anxious to make his kill, Fangler lost time by charging from the house toward the stack.

Dagen was up on his knees, shaking his badly jarred head like a bull worsted in a range battle.

Bending low, Andy leaped over the creek bank with the girl gripped in his arms, just as Fangler's close bullet ripped over his head. Dropping Terry, he leaped to where old McCloud lay with face half buried in the cool water. He seized the light rifle which had fallen from the horseman's grip. Turning, he looked

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over the bank, and his fast bullet cut up dirt ahead of Fangler as he rushed toward the creek bank.

As Fangler dropped flat on the ground, Andy turned, tossed the rifle to the girl. Then he ran his left arm under McCloud's body and threw the old man over his shoulder like a sack of flour. He thanked his stars as he lumbered down Blue Creek that McCloud was a lightweight.

Andy might not have retreated from two able-bodied gunmen, if he hadn't felt somehow responsible for the safety of the girl and her father. Now he bade Terry cover the flight down the stream with the rifle. He had dropped his iron bar. He did not note that Terry was also carrying this under her arm as though it were a battle souvenir.

It ran in Andy's fight-fogged mind, that if he could find a patch of brush or pile of rocks, he might succeed in making a successful stand-off until the arrival of officers from Powder Bend.

Before departing with Fangler and Dagen, he had left word at the jail of his plan and asked that a posse take the trail.

But it didn't appear that with a light rifle and only a few rounds of ammunition, he could successfully hold out until the law's arrival.

Turning a bend in the creek, he saw a horse tied to a dead tree. It was a buckskin and he recognized it as Dagen's mount. The gunman had anchored the cayuse here in order to guard the rear of the shack.

Andy thrust old McCloud across the saddle, motioned to Terry.

"Climb up!" he commanded. "Hold the reins."

"And you?"

"I'll walk and pack the rifle. Beat the buckskin with that iron bar yo're carryin' if he don't travel fast enough."

"Which way shall I go?"

"Toward the thickest timber. You know this country better than I do."

She wasted no words. Turning the pony, she forced the beast into a patch of brush. The buckskin would have held back but Terry belabored it with the iron bar. So the pony marched slowly ahead with Andy bringing up the rear, looking ever over his back trail for sign of Dagen and Fangler in pursuit.

He heard the girl call to him. "It was on the upper edge of this bend where my father discovered signs of his stolen horses and blamed Payton for hiding them here."

Andy answered grimly. "Keep that hoss movin'. We got more to worry about now than who stole whose hosses."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE BLAZED TRAIL.

AN hour later, the forlorn and desperate march led into thicker timber above Blue Creek where it appeared no horse could travel because of down logs, deadfalls, holes in the ground where vast snowbanks had melted.

Andy, who knew that the rifle carried only three shells, stood grimly on guard while Terry strove to force the horse ahead with the iron bar she was using as a gad.

"If I hadn't taken off my spurs," she sobbed.

Andy had also taken off his hooks to make that rush toward the creek.

"The iron bar," he comforted her, "will wear longer than a dead pine stick."

They both knew that the time had come when the buckskin wouldn't go ahead. And during the march, Andy had sighted Fangler

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and Dagen, scouting the trail, hanging to it like wolves pursuing a wounded elk.

They were a high mile above Blue Creek Valley, in the roughest sort of mountain country. Andy believed now that the girl and old McCloud would fall from fatigue before they could put enough distance between them and the pursuing gunmen.

Far down the slope, advancing slowly through an old fire-burn, he again sighted the figures of Dagen and Fangler. He knew they were nosing out the trail. He had resorted to all his range craft to hide tracks, but the buckskin had always proven extraordinarily stubborn at striking away from the natural line of travel.

Where the pony stood balking, a small stream came down through the woods.

"Andy," Terry called out, "I think this horse knows which way he wants to go. He keeps turning his head toward that little seep of water."

"Thirsty, mebbe. Give him a drink while I keep an eye on our friends."

But a moment later came Terry's cry: "Andy, this horse didn't stop to drink. He's in the little stream and walking right up it like a soldier."

Andy whirled and stared, amazed, as the buckskin shouldered ahead through brush, and through water up to its fetlocks.

"He knows where he wants to go," the puncher said. "Give him his head."

So Andy stepped into the water, grabbed the buckskin's tail. And the cayuse fairly dragged him up the steep slope, staying in the muddy water for a quarter mile, then stepping out where the timber thinned and making a way up through the pines.

So in this last extremity, the balky buckskin, owned by an enemy, gave the McClouds and the Chugwater pilgrim another chance for life. The going was rough and hard, and Andy's lungs fought for air and his heart pounded wildly in the thin, high air. The girl and her father were also suffering. But courage held all to the course set by the buckskin.

Andy, clinging to the buckskin's tail over steep stretches, couldn't see ahead. His job was to fight any rear-guard action with Fangler and Dagen.

He heard the cry of the girl: "We're on a blazed trail."

It was true. Andy lumbered around the halted horse and there saw tiny but freshly cut marks on the trunks of pines indicating a way through the forest. And a few holes in beds of dry pine needles indicated that horses had passed this way.

This buckskin had found the secret trail by its strange instinct for going home.

"That's it," whispered Andy. "The buckskin's been this way before. He wants to go back for some reason that I can't figure. For this is a reg'lar boar's nest of a woods."

But he understood the reason, a quarter hour later, when the buckskin walked into a tiny park in the timber, thrust his head over a pole fence built of pines, and whinnied to a bunch of ribby-looking ponies bunched in the inclosure.

Andy stared, too. These horses were gaunt and big-eyed, but they showed good breeding.

"Our Morgans!" Terry cried.

"The stolen herd?" said Andy. "The herd that my pard was blamed for stealin'? But Smiley Dagen's hoss brought us here. Which proves that—"

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"That Dagen built that trail through the timber. His hoss was trained to foller it."

But Andy smiled as he saw the buckskin drop its nose and begin to nibble along the lower poles of the corral. He bent and examined the dust. Then he exhibited what he had discovered to Terry. She stared down, wide-eyed.

"Oats," said Andy. "Hosses like to stay around a place where they're fed oats. This buckskin come back here, because Dagen and his hoss thief pals had been feedin' their mounts oats to keep 'em in hard flesh. Here's some scattered on the ground."

"But our ponies," the girl cried, "have been penned up until they're hungry and thirsty. Our poor Morgans. I'll turn them out where they can go home to food and water."

Old Bill McCloud was a horseman, first, last, and all the time. The girl's cry cut through the thick of his fever. He raised his feeble form in the saddle, and grasped the horn with his left hand while his blurred eyes ran over the forms of the Morgan geldings close-held in the thieves' corral. Then a smile of pure joy broke like sunlight on his pain-racked face. "My pet ponies!" he whispered, and collapsed across the buckskin's withers.

As the girl scurried around the corral to discover a gate, Andy gently eased old Bill to the ground and laid him out in the shade beside the small spring from which emerged the stream that had guided the buckskin toward the hide-out.

As he knelt there, he heard the crackle of the brush, the scream of the girl.

"Andy, they've found us!"

He saw Terry come running around a corner of the trail with Smiley Dagen, afoot, and in hot pursuit.

The girl darted back of the buckskin horse, which began to circle and snort in fear. Only the movements of the animal prevented Dagen from reaching Terry McCloud.

And that merciful short space of time gave Andy time to leap to his feet and swing his light rifle. He shot down the owner of the buckskin, killed him without mercy, for the man's own mount had proved the black plot that Dagen had launched to bring on trouble between Ed Payton and Bill McCloud.

Then Lafe Fangler came into sight, scuttling from one tall tree to another, believing that with his six-gun he could easily bag Andy. His first bullet clipped bark from the top pole on the fence. Andy, dropping to his knees, rolled old McCloud under the bottom rail hoping it would serve as a cover for the horseman. The girl had grasped the buckskin's reins and was circling the wall-eyed horse, using it as a shield between herself and Fangler's gun.

The Seven Circle man came out on the run. Andy had dropped. Fangler believed his bullet had touched the Chugwater pilgrim. But with his tired back against the fence, a small-caliber bullet in his rifle, and a prayer on his lips, Andy snapped a shot that broke Fangler's gun arm and knocked him flat. And there he lay, fearful that Andy would pump a death shot.

Hours later, the posse, working out the trail up the mountain, found the little party. Fangler was now almost as feverish as McCloud. Dagen would never steal another horse.

"I had one bullet left," Andy said grimly to the deputy sheriff. "I



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told Fangler I'd use it on him, if he didn't talk. So he did. The fool! He and Dagen framed this whole deal to control Blue Creek. They stole the McCloud hosses to cause trouble between Payton and the old man. With both outa the way, they'd have all the range. And they figured it would be comical to have me kill McCloud. But Fangler forgot that me an' Payton was pards. When he came north, we made out wills in each other's favor so if anything happened we wouldn't be wiped out. By that will, I'm heir to Payton's homestead."

The deputy nodded. "Fangler will live to make a full confession I reckon. Glad you saved him. Reckon it was him and Dagen killed Ed. And likely Dagen got old McCloud to meet the girl by carryin' the note to her."

"Reckon so," said Andy. And explained how he had found the bloodstains on the floor indicating that Ed had been killed in his bunk and the mattress burned to hide signs of the struggle.

But they also burned a haystack," he went on. "I couldn't figure that. I saw no reason for it. Even a killer hates to waste good stock feed in a high mountain country. I know why they burned the bunk, but I can't figure why they burned that hay."

"I know," Terry whispered, holding up the iron bar with which the pilgrim had waged brave battle. "I've scraped the ashes off this. It means something to me, Andy. It means you used it to save a girl and her father who needed help badly. This isn't an iron bar at all. Can't you see the queer knob on the end?"

Andy looked and gasped. "It's a gun barrel. That's the front sight."

"Yes," Terry said sadly. "They set fire to the hay to hide the murder rifle. This is all that remains of dad's old Sharps. It should clear him completely."

"Why?" asked the deputy.

Andy answered for her. "No old horseman like McCloud would burn up good hay. Nor a gun that he had owned and treasured for years. A good hoss showed us the real killers, and the old Sharps gun give us a lift in a tight spot. The boys down on the Chugwater will be glad to hear about how Ed's killers was rounded up."

"I hope you aren't riding on, cowboy," Terry said in a small voice. "You just said you now owned the Payton land."

"There's a sign on the drift fence," Andy said gruffly. "It says. 'Ride on, cowboy.'"

The girl smiled. "Signs," she answered, "are easily changed with a little black paint. I could make it read this way: 'Ride in, cowboy'!"

THE END

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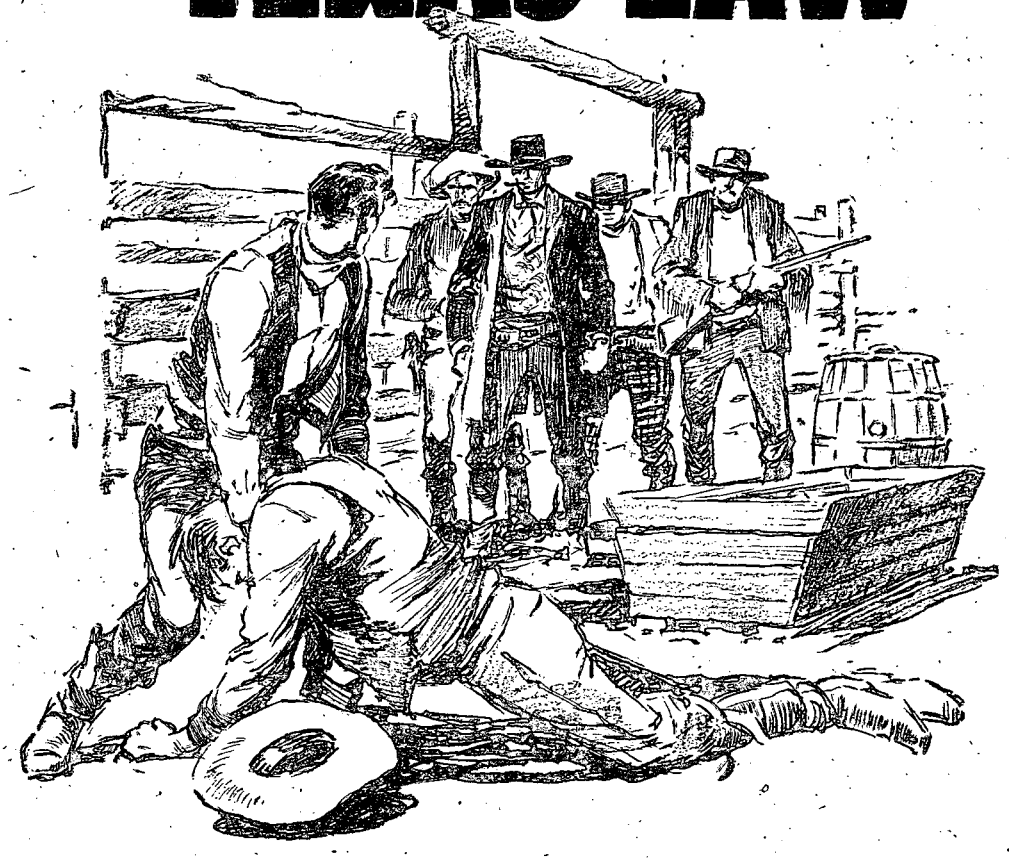
# TEXAS LAW



## PART I.

by CHUCK MARTIN

***De-horning the gun-studded hombres of Dodge City was a chore that led Silent Sutton down a bullet-swept trail of death!***

### CHAPTER I

#### SIX-GUN TROUBLE

THE lusty barking roar of six-guns greeted Silent Sutton as he forded the Arkansas River and pointed his horse toward what had once been Buffalo City. Massive piles of cured buffalo hides hid the new cow town that had sprung up north of Front Street, and a man might dodge death if he reached sanctuary in time.

Sutton reined his horse behind a pile of hides as the thud of boots echoed down a narrow aisle. He twitched his six-guns from force of habit, and his clear blue eyes narrowed when a fugitive skidded around a corner and raced toward a saddled horse tied near a peeled-pole corral.

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**CRAIL CREEDON**

A mob of yelling cowboys pounded after the fleeing man, and he slid to a stop when he saw that he was cut off from his horse. Both hands went high above his tousled head to signify complete surrender, and Sutton's lips curled when he saw the badge of a deputy marshal pinned to the fugitive's worn vest.

Six-shooters blasted like cannons between the narrow aisles as a dozen cowboys showed their contempt for the law by using the nickeled star for a target. The terrified deputy was hurled to the ground under the smashing impact of .45-caliber slugs. The mob raced back toward Front Street to seek new victims before the dying man's boots had stopped rattling, and Silent Sutton turned his head slowly when a low rumbling voice interrupted the echoes of gunfire.

"You better ride on back the way you came, stranger. Dodge City is having some more six-shooter trouble, and you make a fairish target for outlaw lead!"

Silent Sutton eased his six-foot frame in the saddle and shrugged his wide shoulders. The speaker was a stocky man around fifty years old, if one judged from the gray beard that covered the lower part of his wind-tanned face. He gripped an old Sharps rifle in his gnarled hands, and his flat beaver hat and buckskin pants were the garb of a buffalo hunter.

A shell-studded gun belt sagged from his lean hips, with a .45 Peacemaker Colt in the holster on his right leg, and he carried a long skinning knife in a sheath on the left side.

Now his gray eyes stared at Sutton and lighted with recognition.

"Name's Buffalo McGrew," he introduced himself, with a burr in his deep voice. "Ain't you Silent Sutton from down Texas way?"

Sutton nodded without speaking, and stared at the bullet-torn body of the dead deputy. Silent was drawn fine from long days and nights in the saddle—a hundred and seventy pounds of rawhide and whalebone. His smooth, tanned face expressed no emotion, and it was evident that he was no stranger to sudden death.

"You'll be about twenty-four now," the old buffalo hunter said musingly. "Crail Creedon was telling me something about you, that you wouldn't last a day here in Dodge. The railroad is finished, and they ain't no such thing as law since Stud Bailey took to bossing the town."

Silent Sutton shrugged lightly and touched his six-guns with the tips of his long fingers. His twin holsters advertised the fact that here was a man who was doubly sure of his ability to take care of himself. His silence also told the initiated that those same guns would do most of his talking.

"I know Crail Creedon is yore uncle, but you better stay clear of that proddy old longhorn," Buffalo McGrew advised. "He's on the peck because of the new town law which

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says a feller can't pack a shootin' iron in town."

Silent Sutton showed emotion in his stern face for the first time. His lips tightened in a straight line as furrows creased his forehead. Then he jerked the thongs that held his holsters, and slowly unbuckled his crossed gun belts. He shoved them deep in a saddlebag behind his cantle while Buffalo McGrew stared his unbelief. The old plainsman shook his head when Sutton picked up his bridle reins and jogged through the aisles of buffalo hides toward Front Street, and the new cow town of Dodge City.

"He don't know the meaning of fear, but the wild bunch will kill him," McGrew muttered in his beard, and then he set his square jaw and followed on foot. "No wonder they call him Silent," he said to himself. "He never opened his mouth one time, but he knows he's riding into trouble."

Silent Sutton left the curing yards and stared at the booming cow town that had sprung up across the railroad tracks. Two years ago it had been known as Buffalo City, and Wichita had been the end of the Chisholm Trail. Now the Texas herds came to Dodge City, and trail herds meant hard-riding cowboys who held fixed ideas about life, love, and the pursuit of happiness.

Sutton sat his horse near the Last Chance Saloon and stared at the difference two years can make. Heavy board sidewalks were laid on the north side of Front Street, and they were now being used by yelling cowboys who raced their horses as six-guns roared in their hands.

Dance halls and saloons occupied most of the false-fronted buildings. Windows had been shot out in spite of heavy barricades. Bullwhackers mingled with soldiers from Fort Dodge, but they stayed inside because a man on foot was at a disadvantage. Cowboys did all their work and took most of their fun from their saddles, and now they were running Dodge City up a tree.

Silent Sutton nudged his horse with a blunted spur and rode across Front Street to the Longhorn Corral. Hard-faced gun-fighters stared at him and sneered at the burnished spots on the legs of his gray wool pants. They knew that he had unstrapped his hardware to avoid trouble, and any cowhand who avoided a fight was branded a coward.

Sutton swung down to the ground and turned his horse over to a warp-legged old hostler. His saddlebags held a change of clothing, and he swung them over his arm as he started for the Occidental Hotel right next to the corral.

He stopped abruptly as a cowboy rode into the big corral with a struggling man on the end of his rope, followed by a dozen mounted men who were jeering derisively. A second prisoner was dragged into the high corral, and within a minute the pair were surrounded by a hundred yelling cowboys.

Silent Sutton turned slowly and handed his saddlebags to the gaping hostler. A tall rider swung down from his scarred saddle, pushed through the crowd, and held up his hand. Sutton felt a touch on his arm, and his head turned slowly toward Buffalo McGrew.

"That tall hombre is Ramrod Bailey, brother to Stud," McGrew whispered hoarsely. "They've taken the mayor and the judge right out of their offices. Necktie Patton is mayor of Dodge, or he was until hell busted loose right after dinner. The other gent is Judge Bisley Jordan, and both of 'em are past fifty. Bet-

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ter strap yore hardware on again, Silent."

Ramrod Bailey was a trail boss, and he looked the part. He was unquestionably a leader among the cowboys, and they stopped yelling long enough to hear what he had to say.

"It's agin' the law to kill a man what ain't heeled," Ramrod Bailey began seriously. "So we'll just give these salty gents a chance to get even. Fist Maroney was arrested and fined for packin' a gun last night, and he don't like it none whatever. Better take the judge first, Maroney."

Silent Sutton compared the two men when a tall cowboy jumped to the center of the ring. Fist Maroney was six feet two, fast on his feet, and tough from long hours in the saddle. He threw off his high-peaked Stetson and ruffled his flaming red hair with a hand as big as a ham.

Judge Bisley Jordan was a stocky man of medium height, and his black hair was streaked with gray. Outweighed by forty pounds, and twice the age of Fist Maroney, the judge shrugged the loop from his arms and stepped into the ring.

Maroney danced in, jabbing with a long snaky left arm. The judge brushed the light blows aside and countered with a swinging right that caught Fist Maroney full in the mouth. Before the judge could step back, Maroney's powerful arms grabbed Jordan and threw him hard. A hammering blow knocked Judge Jordan unconscious before he could move his head to evade the blow.

Fist Maroney came to his feet like a cat, and yelled like an Indian. His right boot swung back with the pointed toe aimed at the helpless man's bleeding face, but that kicking boot never found its mark.

Silent Sutton growled softly as he hurled himself across the corral. His left hand caught Maroney by a shoulder and whirled him away from his intended victim.

Maroney caught his balance and turned to face the intruder. Sutton shifted his feet and brought his balled fists up in front of his deep swelling chest, and he waited for the cowboy to recover from his surprise.

Fist Maroney was the champion knuckle fighter of the cow camps. A wide grin spread across his red, freckled face. He was two inches taller than the stranger, but their ages and weights would be nearly the same. Maroney threw back his head and roared his war talk:

"I ain't never had enough fight. You asked for it, cowboy!"

He danced in fast and feinted with his left fist to draw down Sutton's guard. His right whistled across like a hammer, but Silent Sutton picked it off with his left, and crossed with his right to the turned-up nose. Then his fists beat a tattoo on Maroney's face as the blood spurted from the champion's broken nose, and every goggle-eyed cowboy in the crowd knew that the silent stranger was pulling his punches.

Fist Maroney danced away, covering his bleeding face. But the grim stranger gave him no respite. Sutton shifted suddenly and drove a sledge-hammer blow to the belly, and Maroney doubled over with a grunt of pain.

Silent Sutton jabbed lightly with his left to tilt the cowboy's head up just so. His right fist crossed over neatly, driving straight from the shoulder.

Fist Maroney clicked his teeth when the blow crashed against his exposed jaw. Then he broke at the knees and folded up, falling slowly forward on his bleeding face.

A stunned silence paralyzed the

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staring cowboys as their champion lowered his colors. Breath hissed against straining lungs, sighing for escape. Then a hundred hands slapped for holsters that made all men equal, in spite of size or weight.

"Hold it, cowhands!" a snarling voice whispered hoarsely, and Buffalo McGrew clicked back the hammer of his big Sharps rifle. "Give Silent Sutton a chance to talk before you declare war!"

Sutton was breathing easily as he turned slowly and looked the threatening crowd over. Being a Texas man himself, he knew the thoughts that were seething through Texas brains. Every man in that crowd wanted to give him fight, but Sutton shrugged and picked out their leader.

"Anybody else want some?" he broke his silence. "How about you, Ramrod?"

Ramrod Bailey shrilled a Texas yell and swept off his battered Stetson. He sailed it into the ring as an acceptance of the challenge, unbuckled his crossed gun belts, and stomped his high-heeled boots like a fighting cock.

"No holts barred!" he yelled, and charged Sutton with his head low, and both arms pumping.

Silent Sutton side-stepped the rush and followed like Bailey's shadow as the trail boss hurtled past. He caught Bailey with a jabbing left fist when the swarthy cowboy made his turn; followed through with a driving right to Bailey's nose that spattered the crowd with blood.

The trail boss gave back a step and Sutton was on top of him before he could get set, sharp-shooting his punches with deadly accuracy. He alternated his attack from head to body, driving Ramrod Bailey back until the bleeding trail boss was forced to make a stand when his back touched the crowd.

BUFFALO McGREW

"Bulldog him, Ramrod," a clear voice suggested, and Ramrod Bailey obeyed instantly.

He dug in with his heels and launched his muscled body forward and down with his arms spread wide. Silent Sutton had also heard the instruction, and he leaped aside, turning his body at the same time. A brawny arm hit his leg and scissored for a grip, but Sutton's turn took him out of the trap.

Ramrod Bailey landed in the thick dust on hands and knees. He rolled like a cat, bringing both arms up to protect his bleeding face from the boots he expected. Buffalo McGrew hawed and spat noisily.

"Yo're fightin' a man now, Ramrod. Get up and fight like one yoreself!"

Ramrod Bailey rolled to his feet and made his charge. Silent Sutton jabbed with his left, and followed through with a sizzling right that thudded against Bailey's jaw. Then Sutton added further indignity to the beaten man when he caught Ramrod Bailey to break his fall.

Lowering the unconscious man to the trampled dust, Silent Sutton straightened slowly to face a tall man dressed in black broadcloth and an embroidered vest. The man who

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had given Ramrod Bailey instructions. Sutton's voice was low and even when he spoke.

"How about you, Stud Bailey?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE NEW MARSHAL

STUD BAILEY raised his head slightly and probed Silent Sutton's face with narrowed black eyes. He was a gambler from his fifty-dollar Stetson to polished kid boots, but he was also the boss of Dodge City. His thin lips parted in a slitted smile as he failed to find any fear in the cold blue eyes that locked with his own.

A pair of ivory-handled Colt .45s were belted around his lean hips, and Stud Bailey also held his brother's gun belts with his left hand. His dark eyes flicked down to the burnished marks on Sutton's wool pants, and the gambler nodded slightly.

"Whenever you say, Sutton," he answered in his clear ringing voice. "But when you bring me fight, get yourself dressed like a man!"

Silent Sutton reached out his left hand and beckoned to the old hostler who was holding his saddlebags. He saw Stud Bailey's eyes widen, and then the gambler turned his back squarely and held out both hands to meet someone who was pushing through the crowd.

"You fellers drag your spurs up to the Alamo," Bailey said softly to the crowd, but his words were an order. "All drinks are on the house." His voice changed when he spoke to a pretty girl who was stepping daintily through the deep dust. "Howdy, Molly Jo. May I escort you back to the Dodge House?"

Silent Sutton ignored the saddlebags the old hostler was extending. A flush of surprise stained his bronzed face as he stared at the girl who avoided Stud Bailey and came right to him with both hands extended.

"Silent," she whispered, and her throaty voice was the soft drawl of the South. "I ran all the way when I heard you were in Dodge City. Aren't you glad to see me?" she pouted, when Silent Sutton held her hands and stared over her dark head.

Sutton wrenched his eyes away from Stud Bailey's face and looked down at the girl. Her wide brown eyes were soft with something deeper than friendship, and he smiled gently and nodded his tawny head.

"I'm more than glad, Molly Jo," he said just loud enough for her to hear. "I'll be up to see you and the colonel as soon as I have washed off some of the dust."

"My offer still stands," Stud Bailey interrupted quietly.

Silent Sutton stiffened and dropped Molly Jo's hands. His eyes raised to stare at the gambler's face. Stud Bailey had made two offers, and he ignored Sutton and smiled at Molly Jo Benton.

"I was going up to talk to Colonel Benton," he told the girl, and offered his left arm.

Molly Jo glanced at the crowd, and the three men who were just beginning to stir on the ground. She shuddered slightly as she noticed Sutton's bleeding knuckles for the first time, and a swift change came over her pretty face.

"Perhaps it is best," she murmured, and took Stud Bailey's arm. "I'll be waiting at the Dodge House, Silent. Come as soon as you are presentable."

Little ridges of muscle knotted around Silent Sutton's mouth as he watched the smiling gambler lead Molly Jo Benton across the corral. He took his saddlebags from the old hostler, and the slow fires of anger

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were burning in his eyes when he walked to the Occidental Hotel and registered in the old ledger.

What was Molly Jo doing in Dodge City? Colonel Jim Benton owned the J Bar B down in Uvalde, Texas; and his range joined with the C Bar C. Crail Creedon had been more than an uncle to Silent Sutton, whom he had raised like a son.

The clerk led the way to a room and closed the door behind him. Sutton was washing his face and hands in a granite basin when a knock sounded on the door, followed instantly by a gruff voice.

"It's Buffalo McGrew, Silent. I'm coming in, and bringing friends."

Silent Sutton had protected himself from force of habit. He laid one of his six-shooters on the bed and proceeded to dry his hands, and he showed no surprise when the old buffalo hunter introduced his two companions.

"Meet the mayor, and Judge Bisley Jordan. Gents, this is Silent Sutton from down Texas way. He ain't much on the talk, but you both saw him in action. Break it to him gentle."

Judge Jordan rubbed a lump on his jaw where Fist Maroney had hit him. His iron-gray hair was brushed straight back, and his right hand caressed the grip of a .41 Bisley Colt. His deep voice was forceful and steady as he looked Sutton straight in the eye and made his proposition with true Western brevity.

"We're asking you to take the job as marshal of Dodge, with full authority to run the office as you see fit, Silent Sutton. Name your own salary, pick your own deputies, and rod the law the way it ought to be done!"

"With the town trustees behind you all the way, Silent," Necktie Patton added quietly. "You saw what happened to me and the judge, and our last marshal got away just in time to save his skin."

"Silent saw Deputy Joe White stop a dozen slugs down there in Buffalo City," McGrew explained. "Those trail hands certainly treed the law today, and no mistake."

Silent Sutton dried his hands and hung up the rough huck towel. He stared at his scarred gun belts lying on the bed, thought deeply for a long moment, after which he picked up the belts and buckled them around his lean hips.

"I'm a cowboy, and I'm going to raise cattle," he said slowly. "The trail herds have been losing a heap of cattle, and I came up here to Dodge to find the answer. I'll take the job for a month until you get a marshal who don't booger easy."

Mayor Patton was the only man in Dodge City who wore a necktie regularly. He straightened the black bow and glanced at Judge Jordan with a smile of satisfaction, and the judge produced a badge and administered the oath.

Silent Sutton listened attentively while the judge admitted that there was practically no law in Dodge City. Trail herds had been rustled within sight of the Arkansas River, and their crews had been killed. The rustled cattle had been diverted to Abilene or Ogallala, and Dodge City was crowded with outlaws and rustlers.

"Stud Bailey," Sutton asked quietly, "is he bossing the rustlers, as well as Dodge?"

"Stud Bailey runs the Alamo Saloon and the Red Rose Dance Hall," Judge Jordan answered slowly. "He also buys cattle on the side, and he's done a lot of business with men like Colonel Jim Benton, Dollar-sign Sibley, and Crail Creedon, your uncle."

"That's how come him to get acquainted with Miss Molly Jo," Buf-

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falo McGrew muttered, and avoided Sutton's probing eyes. "You'll find Stud Bailey plenty mixed up in yore business, marshal. How about swearing me in as a deputy?"

Sutton nodded and waited until the old buffalo hunter had pinned on his badge. He had wondered about Molly Jo, but McGrew had given him the answer without making him ask questions. He reached for his hat and spoke bluntly.

"I'll see you men at the courtroom in an hour," he ended the interview, and smiled grimly when he heard stomping boots coming down the hall.

He was gazing through the window when the boots stopped at his door. The door rattled, and a giant of a man threw it open. Sutton flicked his right hand down and covered the intruder with his six-gun.

"Holster that hogleg, you meddlin' yearlin!" a deep voice bellowed, and a wide-shouldered old Texan glared at Sutton and closed the door behind him. "What's this palaver I hear about you signin' on to rod the law in Dodge?"

Crail Creedon spread his big boots and glared down from his superior height. His long cowhorn mustaches bristled with anger, and he hunched his shoulders forward with both hands hooked in his gun belt.

"Sit down and rest yore sides," Sutton said quietly, and holstered his Colt with a flick of his hand. "News shore travels fast in this man's town!"

"Man and boy I've raised you," the old Texan bellowed. "Figgered some day to cut you in on the C Bar C, but you up and dog it when I'm bogged down with grief. Lost half my steers on that last drive up from Uvalde, and what do you do? You hear there's some fast gun-slammers pawin' and a-bellerin' up here at the end of the trail. So you sign up with the law, huntin' glory!"

Silent Sutton smiled when he remembered that big Crail Creedon had taught him how to balance a gun, how to line his sights as the barrel came up, with thumb curling back the hammer. Crail Creedon was his only kin, and a relative by marriage at that. The big shaggy Texan had married Sutton's aunt before he, Silent Sutton, was born. And in his gruff manner, he had raised Silent the hard way.

He had taught Sutton to do a man's work when he was ten years old, and to do it without complaint. The old cattleman had no children of his own, and the wife he had worshiped in his undemonstrative way had died when Silent was twelve. Even then old Crail had masked his grief, but Silent remembered the burning unshed tears in old Crail's eyes, and the gruff tenderness with which he had raised the only kin he had.

"Gun-fighter, that's what yuh are," Creedon bellowed. "I knew it the minute I saw you heft yore daddy's guns, the day after he was killed. Powdersmoke in yore blood the same as Jess Sutton had before you, and you know what happened to him!"

Silent Sutton's mouth tightened at the mention of his father. Jess Sutton had been sheriff of Uvalde County for ten years, and there were some who claimed he had rodded the law to satisfy his lust for blood. Jess Sutton's old Peacemakers now rode on the sturdy legs of his only son, and that son had passed his word.

"Look, Silent," Creedon said more quietly, but it was evident that he was holding his anger in check with an effort, "you can't keep a Texan from wearin' his hardware, no mat-

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ter where he goes. It's part of his riggin', just like his boots and spurs, and his catch rope. Let Dodge City fight her own battles, while you and me tries to cut sign on the rustlers who are getting our C Bar C beef!"

"You borrowed fifty thousand dollars to bring your steers to market," Sutton said very slowly. "Did you sign any papers?"

Crail Creedon snorted and threw his battered old Stetson to the floor. "Didn't need to sign no papers!" he roared. "I'm Texas from hocks to hawns, and my word was all I needed. Hain't a Texan borned who ever backed down on his spoken word!"

"Well, adios," Sutton answered softly. "Like you just now said. I passed my word to rod the law here in Dodge for a time. I'll be seeing you."

Crail Creedon was six foot four, and weighed two hundred lean pounds. His gray hair hung almost to his shoulders, and his hawkish features twisted with a rage he could not control.

"I'm wearin' my hardware!" he bellowed. "Always have wore it, and always will, and to hell with that new town law!"

"Don't wear it north of Front Street, Crail," Sutton said very quietly. "That's deadline for six-guns, and you wouldn't have a chance against Stud Bailey's gang of killers."

"To hell with Stud Bailey, and the same goes for you," the old cattleman sneered. "I ain't but fifty-six, and I'll pack my shootin' irons out in the open as long as I draw breath!"

"Shore you will, Crail," Sutton said soothingly. "But you won't pack 'em north of Front Street. That's the law, made to protect you fellers who are bringing money to Dodge, and I'm rodding that same."

Crail Creedon turned slowly and sucked in a deep breath. His gray eyes were bright under shelving shaggy brows, and his nostrils were flaring wide. He hooked his drop-shanked spurs in the planking for leverage, and then stooped his wide shoulders with a tired sigh.

"I'll stay south of Front Street, marshal," he said, in a husky whis-

STUD BAILEY

pering voice. "If you change yore mind, you'll find me at the Dodge House." He leaned forward with the fight gone from his eyes. "Molly Jo?" he whispered. "Did you ask her yet, Silent?"

Silent Sutton would have jumped any other man who dared to ask him such a question. But Crail Creedon had taken Jess Sutton's place, and Crail was Texas.

"I don't talk much," he muttered very softly, and even then his deep voice was muted.

"I ought to whup you with a rope end, and it bradded," old Crail sneered. "Stud Bailey ain't tongue-tied. He's the handsomest hombre

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SILENT SUTTON

north of the Pecos, and wallerin' in cash money. And I passed him on Front Street with Molly Jo on his arm. *Pshaw!*"

He glared at Silent, and his gray eyes were angry. Then he stomped stiff-legged from the room and slammed the door behind him.

Silent Sutton opened his mouth, trapped it tight, and then he smiled. Blood would tell, and both Molly Jo and Crail Creedon carried the best blood of the old South in their veins. When it came down to the last say-so, he'd let his guns do his talking.

## CHAPTER III

### STUD BAILEY MAKES A DEAL

MOLLY JO BENTON walked with Stud Bailey under the board awnings, and she held her head high. The handsome gambler raised his hat every time a storekeeper spoke to him, and he carried himself with an easy grace that hinted of good blood lines.

The Dodge House was at the far end of Front Street at the northeast corner of the plaza. Two men jumped instantly to their feet when Bailey held the door open for Molly Jo. The girl took her father's hand and spoke softly.

"Silent was fighting again, dad. He will be up to see us as soon as he has made himself presentable."

Colonel Jim Benton stroked his pointed white beard and smiled at his pretty daughter. He had been an officer in the Confederate army, and his tall figure was erect and vigorous.

"My thanks to you, suh, for escorting Molly Jo to safety," he said to Stud Bailey, and turned to introduce his companion. "Mistah Bailey, I present Dollar-sign Sibley of Texas."

Dollar-sign Sibley was a stocky man of medium height, close to sixty years old. His keen gray eyes studied the tall gambler's face, and he nodded without offering his hand. His face was ruddy from the wind, and drooping mustaches framed a firm mouth that offered little compromise to strangers.

"I've heard a lot about Dollar-sign herds," Bailey said with a smile. "Call on me at any time, Sibley."

Dollar-sign frowned slightly at the tone of equality in the gambler's smooth voice. Colonel Benton took his daughter's arm and turned toward the long hall before Sibley could answer.

"I have refreshments in my rooms, gentlemen," he drawled with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "You will do me the honor?"

Dollar-sign Sibley showed his dislike for the tall gambler, but an invitation to drink with the fiery colonel was almost an order. Sibley nodded his head when Molly Jo tucked her hand under his arm, leaving Bailey and her father to follow to their suite of rooms.

Colonel Benton brought out glasses and a quart bottle of whiskey. Stud

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Bailey took his drink and smiled as he offered a toast.

"To the success of Dodge City and the cattlemen who made it what it is," he said confidently.

Sibley frowned and stopped the hand that was carrying his glass to his lips. "The cattlemen never made Dodge what she is today," he contradicted bluntly. "Let's change that some. To a Dodge City where honest men can deliver their cattle and take their money back where the cattle came from. Here's looking at you, colonel!"

Colonel Benton stroked his white Vandyke and smiled with his eyes. Stud Bailey and Dollar-sign Sibley were watching each other, waiting with glasses in their left hands.

"To honest men," the colonel said softly, and downed his liquor neat.

A shade of annoyance crossed the gambler's swarthy face, but he drank to the toast. He wiped his lips with a silken handkerchief taken from his breast pocket, and Sibley wiped his drooping mustaches with the back of his hand.

"Dodge will learn something about square-shooting if the new marshal lives," Sibley declared abruptly. "And he will live unless some dry-gulchin' rustler shoots him in the back."

"Better men than Silent Sutton have tried it," Bailey answered with a careless shrug. "Boothill is full of them, and most of them was shot in front. I'm sorry, Molly Jo," he said with a smile at the frowning girl.

"You know Sutton, eh?" the colonel asked.

"If you will excuse me, father," Molly Jo murmured, and started for an inner room.

The three men waited until her door had closed. Stud Bailey nodded slowly and answered the colonel's question.

"I know *of* Sutton," he said lightly. "He's kin to old Crail Creedon of the C Bar C, and his father was sheriff of Uvalde County years ago. I can name a dozen men in Dodge who can beat Sutton to the gun—and call their shots."

Colonel Benton narrowed his eyes and studied Bailey's face. He could detect no bravado or boastfulness in the gambler's smooth voice. Bailey was stating what he considered an indisputable fact, but Dollar-sign Sibley tightened his jaw and offered an objection.

"If there's a dozen, name one who can beat Silent Sutton to the draw-and-shoot," he challenged brusquely.

"Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman," Bailey answered promptly.

"And you?" Sibley whispered.

"Present company is always excepted," the colonel interrupted with a frown. "You wanted to talk business with us, Bailey?"

Bailey smiled tolerantly and nodded his well-shaped head. His black coat was tailored perfectly to emphasize his wide powerful shoulders and deep chest. His long-fingered hands were white and supple, and there was no paunchiness about his lean midriff. His fingers touched the ivory-handled guns in the molded holsters, but he accepted the change of subject with a shrug.

"The big trail herds have been losing too many cattle, colonel," he began smoothly. "I can offer some help to stop most of this rustling."

"I'm listening," Benton murmured, and then clicked his teeth. "Too many good Texas cowboys have been killed," he added soberly.

"I am in a position to guarantee safe delivery," Bailey said quietly. "For a percentage of the profits, of course."

"Just a minute, Bailey," Sibley cut

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in shortly. "Ain't you and Percentage Parsons in cahoots?"

"Parsons and I are partners in this deal," Bailey corrected smoothly, but there was a trace of anger in his dark eyes. "Parsons bosses a band of trained fighters who risk their lives to protect the herds and their crews."

"You can count me out," Sibley said bluntly. "I won't pay twenty-five percent to you or any other gunman!"

Stud Bailey smiled without losing his temper. He carried his thirty-five years lightly, and there was no tinge of gray in his black hair. His finely-chiseled features expressed maturity and confidence, and Colonel Benton nodded approvingly.

"I lost more than fifty percent of my last herd," he admitted reluctantly. "And the lives of four good men. Crail Creedon lost more than I did, and we've got to do something about it."

"Old Crail could do something about it," Sibley growled. "Silent Sutton could get up his own crew and outfight any gang of rustlers in the Strip!"

"But Sutton is marshal of Dodge now," Bailey murmured. "I would have paid him double his salary to throw in with Parsons and myself. Marshals come cheap, and they die young in Dodge."

"Up to now," Sibley growled stubbornly. "This rustling business is bigger than it looks, and there's a combine at the head of it. If you will excuse me, colonel, I've got some business with the sheriff."

Stud Bailey's eyes narrowed as Sibley stretched to his feet and moved toward the door. Colonel Benton stroked his white beard and shook his head.

"Percentage Parsons rode with Quantrell," he said slowly, but the resentment was plain in his drawling voice. "Quantrell raided both sides during the war between the States, and it goes agin' the grain for me to have any truck with his kind."

"It's just a matter of fighting fire with fire, colonel," Bailey explained. "Parsons bosses a hard crew, but they've got to be hard for the work they do. I don't like the man personally, but business is business."

"You'd make a good cattleman, Bailey," Benton said slowly. "But your present occupation is not conducive to confidence."

"I've always been a gambler," Bailey answered with a quiet dignity, but there was a flare to his sensitive nostrils. "The cattlemen like to play for high stakes, and my games are honest!"

"I like Silent Sutton," Benton said heartily. "With Silent as marshal, the crooks will have to leave Dodge City."

The expression did not change on Bailey's handsome face. He poured another drink slowly, and waited for the colonel to fill his glass. Again he touched his lips daintily with the silk handkerchief.

"Funny about Sutton leaving old Crail Creedon when he was needed most," Bailey remarked slowly. "And there's something in what Sibley said about a combine being behind this wholesale rustling."

Colonel Benton sat up stiffly with a startled gleam in his eyes. Then he shrugged impatiently.

"If you mean Silent Sutton has anything to do with this combine, you're wrong, Bailey," he said sternly. "Molly Jo and I have known Sutton most of his life. Damn his tongue-tied soul!"

"Your daughter is a beautiful girl, colonel," Bailey said humbly. "Dodge City is no place for her."

"Her goodness is her best protection, suh," the colonel answered with

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his white head held high. "Every tough cowboy in Texas would fight for Molly Jo!"

"I also offer my protection," Bailey murmured. "I can control the boys no matter what happens when they buck these new town laws."

"You mean the trail hands will fight the law?" Benton asked with a frown.

"Ordinance No. 6," Bailey answered with a shrug, "says that only the constituted authorities will be permitted to carry firearms north of Front Street. What do you think, Colonel Benton?"

"By hell, you're right, suh," Benton answered heatedly. "A Texan carries his firearms wherever he goes!"

"That's the reason Sutton won't last long in Dodge," the gambler murmured softly, but his dark eyes held a glitter of deadly promise. "If cowmen are stripped of their weapons, they would be easy prey for holdups and rustlers."

"Unless the law could protect honest men," Benton said doubtfully, and furrowed his smooth brow. "I've always held with law and order, and I've always enforced strict discipline."

"The war was over ten years ago, colonel," Bailey pointed out quietly. "There's a difference between law and personal liberty. Take the Constitution. It guarantees every man the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!"

"You forget that I was an officer in the Confederate army, suh," the colonel growled, and then he squared his shoulders. "But that's past now," he murmured, and changed the subject abruptly. "You and this Percentage Parsons guarantee delivery of my trail herd if I pay this holdup fee?" he asked slowly, and stared hard at the gambler.

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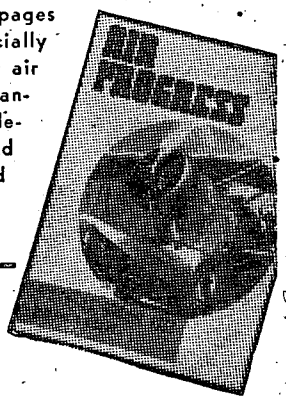


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is taken," Bailey answered with a smile, but there was no mirth in his hard dark eyes.

"I consider it the same as paying tribute!" Benton barked. "I raise cattle on my own range down in Texas. I pay my own crew to drive the critters to market. It is nothing short of a holdup for me to pay a fourth of my profits to Percentage Parsons—and his associates, but I can see no other way out of the difficulty."

"Where is your J Bar B herd now?" Bailey asked quietly. "I'll see that enough fighting men are sent down to meet them."

"They should be crossing the Canadian," Benton answered, and his tone was reluctant. "There's three thousand head of longhorn steers in the herd and fourteen men in my crew. I'll pay that fee, but I want nothing to do with that damn rustler, Percentage Parsons!"

"I will handle all business transactions," Bailey promised, and stood up with his black Stetson in his hand. "It might be well to tell Molly Jo to stay inside tonight," he added with his lips pressed together.

"What do you mean, Bailey?" Benton demanded, and his beard trembled with anger. "A Texan goes where he damn pleases, and Molly Jo is a Texan!"

"The boys are riding in from the cow camps down by the river," Bailey answered quietly. "They'll be wearing their hardware, and the new marshal allows it's against the law. Use your own judgment, Colonel Benton."

"It's no secret, Bailey," the colonel answered coldly, "that you've been running things here in Dodge, and you told me that you could control the wild bunch. Knowing Silent Sutton the way I do, I'd suggest that you hold your crowd in check. Good-day to you, suh!"

## CHAPTER IV

### TESTING THE NEW MARSHAL

SILENT SUTTON was fully dressed when he left the Occidental and stepped to the wide boardwalk. He wore his twin Peacemaker Colts with the same indifference as the rest of his attire, and with the same careless ease. They were a part of him like his handmade boots, and the high-peaked Stetson shoved to the back of his well-shaped head.

He had passed dozens of chuck wagons out on the holding flats south of the river, and each wagon marked the camp of a Texas trail herd. Every outfit carried from ten to fifteen hard-riding cowboys on its pay roll, and each cowboy considered his six-gun a part of his personal attire.

Silent Sutton stood with his back against the wall of the hotel as he studied the booming town. Front Street was mostly saloons and gambling dens for two long blocks until it converged with the plaza. There it widened out with stores and hotels on both sides, but the whittled rows of tie rails continued unbroken, and every hitch rack was crowded with tethered cow ponies.

It was the hour before supper, and the sun was still shining brightly. Several cowboys were riding in the wide dusty street, but for some reason they were walking their horses, and the staccato bark of six-guns was missing.

Sutton pondered on this strange behavior for a time before the answer came to him. There had been a test of strength between the law forces and the cowboys who spent their hard-earned wages in Dodge. Both sides had withdrawn after the

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fight in the Longhorn Corral, and the next move would be up to the law.

The new marshal nodded his head in silent acceptance of the unspoken truce. He was safe until he had reported for duty.

Having found the answer for the unusual quiet, Sutton left the Occidental and walked toward the plaza without haste. Grim-faced cowboys looked him over as he passed the many saloons. Unspoken challenges were hurled at him from smoldering, narrowed eyes, and a low hum of excitement began to buzz when Sutton turned in under a sign which marked Judge Bisley Jordan's court.

Buffalo McGrew was standing just inside the doorway when Sutton entered the room. A slender wiry man, wearing gray wool pants and a buckskin jacket, stood beside McGrew. His age might have been anything between thirty and fifty, but he was as straight as a tall pine, and carried the unmistakable earmarks of a veteran.

"Howdy, Silent," he greeted the new marshal. "Buffalo allowed as how you wanted to see me. Count me in as a deputy and pass out my star."

"Neal Brown!" Sutton greeted the dark-skinned man heartily, and he put all the things he couldn't say in the grip of his right hand. A slow smile changed the expression of his hard fighting face. "Long time no see, you old Injun," he finished quietly.

"Me and McGrew just finished a buffalo hunt," Brown answered, and took the badge Mayor Patton handed him. "Yo're in for trouble, Silent," he warned, "but me and Buffalo are used to plenty of the same."

Silent Sutton watched his new deputy pin the ball-pointed star to his wool shirt. Neal Brown was part

MOLLY JO BENTON

Cherokee Indian, and his courage had never been questioned successfully. He was sparing of speech and fast with his guns, but Sutton had never known him to pick a quarrel.

"Bat rode in an hour ago," McGrew remarked carelessly, but he grinned when Sutton's eyes began to dance. "Said he'd help you gunwhip the wild bunch if you asked him personal."

"Bat Masterson could have any job in Dodge," Sutton murmured wonderingly. "He was sheriff of Ford County for a while, and they never had a better one!"

"I'm in the wrong place," a deep voice said clearly, and Sutton whirled to face a tall man just inside the door. "When Silent Sutton goes to making speeches, it just ain't him," the newcomer said with a chuckle.

"Bat Masterson!" Sutton called eagerly, and crossed the room with long strides to shake hands with an old friend. "You'll take the job?"

"Dodge needs a marshal bad, and she's got one," Masterson answered, and stared Sutton squarely in the eyes. "You passed your word, Silent," he reminded grimly. "You're



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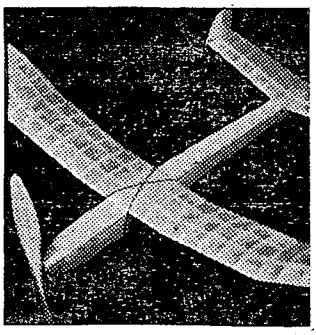

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up against the toughest bunch of killers in all of Kansas, and I ain't saying you might not need some help. Hand me a deputy's badge, and mumble your piece."

Judge Bisley Jordan stood up behind his desk when he realized that Sutton was not going to make a long talk. Jordan used his old .41 Bisley for a gavel to get attention, and he spoke with some difficulty because of his swollen jaw.

"You deputies will take your orders from Marshal Sutton," he began slowly. "There's been too many killings in Dodge, and every law badge is a target. Boothill is filled with lawmen who died too young. The trustees have drawn up a set of ordinances."

Bat Masterson glanced at Sutton and shook his head slightly. He knew what was coming, but Masterson could take orders as well as give them. Silent Sutton was the law boss.

No one interrupted when Judge Jordan paused for breath. The new marshal and his deputies were listening attentively, like players learning the rules of a new game. Jordan rubbed his swollen jaw, and his stern voice vibrated with determination when he spoke for the trustees.

"It is unlawful to carry firearms within the city limits except by those duly constituted to preserve law and order. We know that it is impossible to enforce this ordinance without some bloodshed, and the odds are about a hundred to one. This court will remain open for business tonight!"

Judge Jordan holstered his Bisley and sat down behind his desk. He watched Sutton, and waited for the marshal to speak. The three deputies waited for their first orders, and finally Buffalo McGrew broke the silence.

"I reckon your first job is down

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in the Alamo, Silent," the old buffalo hunter said casually. "Sarge Billings was making talk with his big mouth wide open and tellin' it scarey. Said he was goin' to take yore hardware offn you, an' run you out o' town!"

Sutton's two hands flickered swiftly and loosened the twin Colts in his molded holsters. He had heard much about Sarge Billings; a tricky gun fighter who had served a hitch as sergeant of cavalry out at Fort Dodge. If Billings was as fast as rumor declared, the new law would get a severe test.

"Billings, yes," Bat Masterson said quietly, speaking to Sutton. "But most of these cowhands are just full of hell and vinegar. We can arrest a bunch of them, and the judge can fine 'em enough to help pay expenses."

"The trustees will pay two dollars and a half for every arrest," Mayor Patton explained. "If it suits the marshal, I suggest you pool the fund and divide it among the four of you."

Silent Sutton nodded agreement and tightened his hat to shade his steady blue eyes. He left the courtroom without speaking, with his shoulders back, and his long arms swinging to match the beat of his stride.

Bat Masterson and Neal Brown crossed the street to the railroad tracks. Buffalo McGrew gave Sutton a twenty-pace start, and then fell in behind him. The Alamo Saloon was Stud Bailey's headquarters, and McGrew knew that Bailey had arranged with Sarge Billings to test the law.

The north side of Front Street was lined with bullwhackers, and soldiers from the fort. Cowboys were gathered in little groups, talking softly about the coming showdown. Silence fell as Sutton walked under the board awnings, with his hands well away from his holstered guns.

A hundred men were gathered in the Alamo, but a space had been kept clear at the front of the long bar. Sarge Billings occupied the clearing by himself, drinking from a quart bottle. After each swig he wiped his black mustaches with the back of his left hand. A long-barreled .45 was thonged low on his right leg; and Billings was the type who whittled notches for his dead, as the gun butt evidenced.

"They's seven notches on that ol' six-gun, not countin' for redskins," he boasted loudly. "I whittled for the damn deputy over in Buffalo City, on account I tallied for him first. This new marshal won't be any different." He took another swig of bar whiskey.

He wiped his flowing mustaches and placed the bottle carefully on the bar. A strange oppressive silence had fallen over the crowd, and Billings jerked up his head with a grunt of surprise.

A tall man was standing in the middle of the boardwalk, just outside the saloon. The badge on his vest reflected the rays of the dying sun, and both hands were hanging at his sides. He was balancing easily on wide spread boots, staring at Sarge Billings intently, and his lips formed a straight uncompromising line.

Billings turned squarely and hooked both hands in his sagging gun belt. It was up to the law to open the play as he saw it, but a minute ticked away to tighten his straining nerves. A copy of the new town law forbidding the carrying or discharging of firearms was tacked to a post behind Sutton, and he called attention to it with a single jerk of his head.

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"You can't make that law stick," Sarge Billings growled hoarsely, and stooped his shoulders as he went into a crouch. "Say yore piece, and then try to back up yore palaver!"

Silent Sutton paid no attention to the threatening crowd. The code of Judge Colt meant more to these rough men than all the man-made laws. It gave each man a chance for his taw, and this fight was between Sarge Billings and Silent Sutton.

"Mebbe yo're goin' to arrest me for bustin' that new law?" Billings sneered.

Sutton stared into the close-set eyes without answering. As far as he was concerned, no answer was necessary. Sarge Billings knew the law and had issued a personal challenge to test it. Several law officers had been killed because they talked too much. The new officers wouldn't make that same mistake, but would let their guns talk for them.

Silence was natural to Sutton, fitting him like an old glove. Sarge Billings was given to boasting and loud talk, and the edge in his voice gave evidence that his nerves were cracking under the strain.

"I'm goin' to take yore guns off you and then run you out of town, Sutton!" he yelled loudly. "Elevate pronto or eat my smoke!"

He leaned forward with his right hand shadowing the butt of his gun. He had worked himself into a killing rage, and his dark eyes were flecked with red.

Silent Sutton was like a figure chiseled from granite. Both hands were quiet and steady below his open holsters. His blue eyes were narrowed slightly, but they never wavered as the marshal watched the gun fighter's right hand.

Sarge Billings slapped for his six-gun without warning. His gun was sliding from the oiled holster when Silent Sutton twitched his right shoulder. The heavy Peacemaker seemed to leap to his long fingers with a throaty roar, and Sarge Billings triggered a slug into the saloon floor before he broke at the knees.

Sutton eared back for a follow-up, and turned his smoking Colt to cover Stud Bailey standing behind the bar. A hundred hands reached for holsters, but the smooth oily voice of Stud Bailey spoke, a soft clear warning.

"Don't draw, men. This Silent son means to get me first, and he'd do it before you could clear leather. It was a fair fight between him and Billings, and Sarge shot second!"

Sutton nodded and turned to the crowd. "You gents check yore six-guns before you come out on the streets."

Buffalo McGrew told the crowd in the Alamo: "Our orders are to shoot to kill, and we aim to even up that Boothill tally!"

Bat Masterson and Neal Brown had lined up a crowd near the courtroom. They herded the sullen cowboys and teamsters through the wide doors. Brown had a sawed-off shotgun in his capable hands.

"Mayor Patton has another one, just in case some of your pards tries a rescue," Brown said loudly. "This scattergun runs nine buckshot to the barrel, so don't tempt me to trip both triggers!"

"Him," Stud Bailey said to Sutton, and pointed to the body of Billings. "The law smoked him down, and the law can bury him!"

"Bury him or let him draw flies," Buffalo McGrew answered for Sutton. "Sarge was drawin' pay from you, and he's still yore man!"

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*Sarge Billings' gun came out of his holster a second too late!*

Silent Sutton jacked the spent shell from his gun and thumbed a fresh one into the cylinder. He holstered his weapon with a flick of his hand, stared at Bailey, and waited until the gambler shrugged and shook his head. Sutton didn't say anything, but he guessed that Stud Bailey didn't want any.

## CHAPTER V

### REMEMBER THE ALAMO!

THE last of the crowd was moving through the courtroom doors, and Silent Sutton stepped inside to watch Judge Bisley Jordan do his work. Bat Masterson was emptying holsters as Necktie Patton and Neal

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Brown covered the sullen prisoners with their deadly shotguns.

Judge Jordan hammered on his desk with the .41 Bisley in his right hand. The mutterings stopped instantly, and the judge did not speak until he had counted heads.

"Every one of you gents is guilty of breaking Ordinance No. 6," he began sternly. "I counted thirty-four violators, and I find you, and each of you, guilty as charged. The fines are twenty-five dollars a head, and you can get your shooting irons when you pay your fines. This court is dismissed!"

Crail Creedon was sitting in the lobby of the Dodge House when the news reached him. His face clouded with anger when he looked out on the plaza and saw the empty holsters of some of his own cowboys. His long cowhorn mustaches bristled as he walked stiff-legged through the door.

"Fifty of you hardcases, and you pick a loud-mouthed soldier to settle yore fuss!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Not a rannihan among you man enough to trim Silent Sutton's horns, and him playin' out his string lone-handed!"

Jud Carter was a warp-legged veteran of the long trails, and ramrod of the C Bar C drive. He rubbed his stubbled chin for a moment, and then a slow grin spread across his weathered features. Silent Sutton was coming toward the plaza, and the new marshal was staring at the glint of metal on Creedon's right leg.

"Yonder comes yore nevvy, boss," Carter said to Creedon. "Looks like you don't aim to pay no mind to Ordinance 6."

Creedon growled like a bear and turned to face Sutton. The windows of the hotel lobby were filled with watching cattlemen, and Creedon saw the expectant grins on their faces. Sutton came right up to him and spoke quietly.

"Check your six-gun at the rack inside, Crail," he told the old cattleman. "That's the law."

"Damn the law!" the old Texan shouted hoarsely. "You throw down on me, I'll wing you shore as hell!"

Silent Sutton studied the man who had raised him from boyhood. If he allowed old Crail to bluff him, every old mossyhorn in Dodge would flaunt his authority. They were a stubborn breed of fighters who would never admit that the advancing years had slowed them down, and old age meant nothing to the gun-hung toughs who boasted loudly of their killings.

Judge Jordan had explained that the new law was meant to protect the older cattlemen who were bringing wealth to Dodge City. They carried large sums of money openly, and many of them had been robbed after selling their trail herds.

The six-gun code held that every man who packed a gun was giving plain notice that he could take care of himself. Whether slow or fast, old or young, if two men reached for their Colts, the law could call it nothing but self-defense, and acquit the winner.

"Check your hardware at the desk, Crail," Sutton repeated quietly. "It will save us both a heap of trouble."

"Trouble?" Crail Creedon bellowed. "You ever know me to run away from trouble when it rode right up to meet me?"

His face was convulsed with rage, and the stubborn old Texan went into a crouch with his right hand poised above his holster. Even then he might have avoided an open clash, but the cackling laugh of another oldster came from the hotel lobby.

Crail Creedon stiffened slowly.

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They'd laugh at him, would they? This young squirt of a lawman would trim his horns in front of a crowd, would he?

His shoulder twitched to send his gnarled hand plunging down to his own open holster. Silent Sutton stared with amazement. One of Crail Creedon's admonitions had been never to pull a gun unless you intended to use it, and the young marshal acted instinctively.

He took a quick step forward just as the six-gun cleared leather. Old Crail's thumb was earing back the hammer when Sutton chopped his right fist to the old cattleman's jaw. His left hand caught the falling hammer on his thumb, and he turned swiftly to bring Creedon's arm up over his own shoulder.

The old Texan's boots dragged as Sutton crossed the plaza and carried the half-conscious man inside the lobby of the Dodge House. Dollar-sign Sibley watched without speaking when Sutton lowered old Crail to a chair, and the marshal's lips tightened when Molly Jo stepped from behind a pillar with scorn in her dark eyes.

"You'd do that to an old man," she lashed him in a low husky whisper, and sat down with her arms supporting Creedon.

Her words were like a stab that brought a brief flash of pain to Sutton's blue eyes. It winked out instantly, and Sutton walked over to the counter and raised the spiked hammer from his left thumb. He handed the gun to the clerk and jerked his head toward the gun rack provided according to the law.

"Tell him I'm sorry I had to hit him, but I couldn't shoot an old-timer," he told the gaping clerk; and at the same time, his words told the oldsters what course he would follow if they questioned his authority. Then he walked out into the plaza without a backward glance.

Only the fine wrinkles that sprayed out from the corners of his eyes told of the conflict that was raging within him, and of his rugged affection for Crail Creedon. The old Texan would paw and bellow like a range bull that has been whipped out of the herd; and two other old range bulls had witnessed his downfall.

Colonel Jim Benton cleared his throat and exchanged glances with Dollar-sign Sibley. The colonel clicked his heels together, executed a smart right-about-face, and lined up at Creedon's left shoulder. Sibley stepped to the right, and they each took an arm and raised Creedon to his feet. Walking stiffly erect, the three old-timers crossed the lobby and headed for Benton's rooms.

All three had been comrades in an army long disbanded, but invisible bonds would hold them together so long as they lived. Not a word was spoken until the door closed behind them. Benton produced three glasses and a quart of Kentucky Bourbon. He poured the glasses full, handed them to his companions, and raised his own glass.

"To the confusion of our enemies, gentlemen," he toasted in a firm drawling voice. "And let us remember the Alamo!"

They drank their liquor neat, and Crail Creedon straightened the droop of his square shoulders. His faded eyes flashed with a renewed vigor, and he started to speak.

No words came from his parted lips, but a thoughtful expression creased his high tanned forehead. As though something the colonel had said had awakened a new train of thought in his mind.

"Yeah," he murmured, just above a whisper. "I'm just remembering the Alamo!"

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"Two hundred Texans fought the whole damn Mex army at the battle of the Alamo," Colonel Benton stated proudly. "The odds were fifty to one!"

"There was another battle of the Alamo fought this afternoon," Creedon murmured. "I mean Stud Bailey's place, and the odds were a hundred to one—against Silent Sutton!"

"You've got to kill him, Crail," Colonel Benton said sternly, and stroked his white, pointed beard. "You're a Southerner, suh, and he struck you with his fist!"

Crail Creedon nodded soberly and dropped his right hand to his empty holster. Little veins stood out on his brow as his face reddened with anger, and then his lips moved stiffly.

"He de-horned me," he muttered hoarsely. "My own kin shamed me in public!"

"A man had sooner be dead," Benton clipped, and opened a bureau drawer. He took a .45 Colt pistol by the barrel and extended it to Creedon over his bent elbow. "At your service, suh," he said very softly.

Crail Creedon took the gun and tried the balance. His gray eyes burned with a fierce determination under his shaggy brows, and his nostrils flared like an old cavalry horse that has heard the bugle call for a charge against the foe.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and the three men jerked around with hands streaking toward their holsters. They could die, but none of the three would ever acknowledge defeat, and they would fight to the death for each other.

"It's the clerk," a voice apologized at the door. "With a message for Mr. Creedon."

The colonel and Sibley holstered their guns, and the clerk came into the room. He knew the fighting qualities of Texas men, and their hair-trigger tempers. His hands were empty as he faced Crail Creedon, but a heavy six-gun was thrust down in the band of his pants.

"The new marshal left your gun at the rack, Mister Creedon," he told Creedon hesitantly. "He said to tell you he was sorry he had to hit you, but that he couldn't shoot an old-timer."

He drew Creedon's old Peacemaker very slowly and extended it by the barrel. The old Texan took the weapon and pouched it in his holster, and he turned slowly to Benton after the clerk had left the room.

"I was a damned old fool," he said in a broken whisper. "I taught Silent all he knows about shooting irons. He waited until my pistol had cleared leather, and even then he wouldn't throw down on me." He stared at the colonel, and then sighed. "But he hit me with his fist," he grated hoarsely.

"You've seen everything once, and a lot of them more than that," Benton reminded sternly. "A man can't die but one time, and you were insulted in the public square!"

"Just a minute, colonel," Dollar-sign Sibley interrupted. "Now say I lost my head and insulted you. We've been friends for a good many years. What course would you pursue if I bruised the skin of my hand against your face?"

Colonel Benton drew himself up proudly, and his eyes were like glare ice under the bristling white brows. His nostrils flared widely as he struggled to control the anger brought on by Sibley's suggestion.

"I'd send you notice, suh! We would meet next upon the field of honor!"

"And I'd give you satisfaction," Sibley answered softly. "We are about the same age, but Silent Sut-

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ton is in his prime. Being kin to old Crail, the marshal wouldn't give him gun fight!"

"I'm still in my prime, suh," the colonel said proudly. "And I don't happen to be kin to Silent Sutton. He never saw the day he could whup me, and I'll kill him if he strikes me with his hands!"

"He'd be kin to you if he wasn't tongue-tied," Sibley growled softly. "That won't ever happen since Molly Jo saw him slap old Crail to sleep!"

Crail Creedon listened with his eyes half-closed, and his fingers gripped the handle of his six-gun. He had never discussed the matter with Benton, but both of them had hoped for the same thing. For it was the only thing that could join their far-flung rangelands together.

"You'd do as much for me, Crail," he heard Benton say as if from a great distance. "I'm sending Silent Sutton notice that he either meets me on the field of honor, or I will shoot him down on sight!"

**Will Silent accept the challenge of an older, slower man? Can he enforce the antigun ordinance? Will Molly Jo ever understand why he hit Crail Creedon? Events move like gunfire in next week's installment. Order your next five copies from your own news dealer now! Don't miss a single installment of "Texas Law."**

WRENCH

## WOUNDED INDIAN'S ENDURANCE

An Indian trapper, Dave Cooco, had an unusual accident in December last while he was working on his trap lines. He was carrying a .22-caliber rifle, and as he was moving about, it went off. The soft-nosed bullet entered the calf of his right leg, tearing the muscles badly and shattering the bone. He was alone in the wilds of northern Canada, and he knew that he would have to get attention somehow, or he would freeze to death. He made splints of whittled wood from dead branches that were lying around, bandaged the wound as best he could with bits of his clothing, and started a long trek toward the trans-Canada highway.

The only food he carried was a small bag of biscuits, and on this slight nourishment he hobbled and crawled through the bush and snow drifts for forty-eight hours. He didn't dare rest, even for a moment, knowing that, if he stopped, he would be in danger of falling asleep and would surely die of exposure in his sleep, for the temperature was well below the zero mark.

He kept moving. When he felt his strength failing, he would eat a biscuit or two as he struggled along. He traveled fourteen miles in the two days and nights, and reached the highway just as a truck came in sight. He waved to the driver, who sensed that something was wrong and stopped immediately, got down and helped him very carefully into the truck.

He then drove him to the nearest town, Mattawa, and took him to the hospital, where he was attended to at once. The doctor was amazed when he heard how Cooco, so badly wounded, had kept his determination and his courage during that long painful trek, for he was suffering excruciating pain. The doctor could hardly believe that such a feat of endurance was possible. The thirty-seven-year-old Indian responded to treatment, and when last heard of was expecting to get back soon to his neglected traps.

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# PURGATORY TROUBLE BUSTER

***When a sheriff is called "constable," and a lot of rustlin' goes on, you can look for a six-gun Englishman!***

## by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

He came down Purgatory's main street, a tall, gaunt figure with loose-swinging arms, and legs that hinged from his hips like pendulums. He was as long as a rail and built along the same general lines, but it was his clothes that caught Peaceful Perkins' sleepy attention. He wore a queer little derby and a checkered coat that fitted his narrow shoulders too tightly. His pants were batwinged at the top and tapered down lean, bony legs until they disappeared into high, shiny boots.

A faint frown clouded Peaceful's brow, as he watched the figure approach, and he straightened himself lazily from his slouch on the stoop of the jail door.

"Here comes trouble," he drawled gloomily.

Sheriff Tom Fenner, dozing beside

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the long-jawed puncher, growled sourly. "I been waitin' a week to hear you spout that off. It's been pilin' up inside you like a wind storm. Give you peace an' quiet, and you worry yoreself ragged for a ruckus." He pried open a heavy eyelid, squinted down the street, then both eyes popped open. He jerked erect. "Jumpin' Jehosa—what in horned Hades is that?"

Peaceful wagged his head broodingly and shrugged heavy shoulders. "Looks like a man—sorta," he grunted. "Whatever it is, it's trouble. I got a feelin'—"

Tom Fenner snorted acridly, eyes narrowed calculatingly on the approaching figure. "Built like a snake on stilts," he argued aloud to himself. "Walks on his hind legs like a man, but them clothes—I never seen nothin' human in a riggin' like that."

A dozen yards down the street, the man turned and angled toward the jail. His face was long and angular, and he screwed a round piece of glass into one eye as he strode up. He halted at the edge of the plank walk, his critical stare shifting from Fenner to Peaceful.

"Is either of you cow persons the constable?"

Peaceful's eyes widened. "Sounds like a foghorn with asthma," he grunted. "He talks like a man, almost."

"Constable?" Tom Fenner echoed.

"Constable, old chap—the bobby," the man repeated. "I'm Lord Beverly Ashford-Wychcliff, don't you know. I have my rights, and all that sort. Come now, old boy; I insist on being directed to the constable."

Peaceful swallowed audibly. "Maybe you mean the sheriff, mister," he drawled.

"Jove, but you cow persons are slow," Lord Beverly complained. "That's what I mean, chappies—constable, bobby, sheriff—all that sort of rot. I must see him, you know."

Peaceful chuckled under his breath, slanting a glance at Fenner's reddening face. "Tom Fenner here is sheriff, all right," he drawled, "but I ain't shore about that rot part. You got something on yore chest, Bevvy?"

The Englishman fastened a studious eye on Peaceful's bland face. "Something on my chest? Haw, haw! You mean a complaint to make, I take it. Clever, old man. Ripping, what?"

He turned to Tom Fenner, and the monocle dropped from his eye to hang from the cord around his neck.

"I must have them back, you know," he rattled on. "Spent a thousand pounds on this enterprise. Bought Mr. Jig Condon's estate . . . er . . . ranch. Cawn't—"

Tom Fenner broke in, jaw hardening. "Yuh mean you bought out Jig Condon's Turkeytrack spread?" he jerked out.

The Englishman nodded. "Bully good price, what?" he chortled. "But I jolly well cawn't fail now. He's depending on me—the pater, don't you know. Wants me to prove I'm of the stern stuff, chip off the old block, the good old Wychcliff mettle. So I must have them back, what?"

Peaceful's jaw sagged. "Yuh don't look to me like youh're made of metal, Bevvy. Maybe there's iron in yore blood, but—"

Lord Beverly chuckled. "Iron in my blood. Haw, haw! Positively ripping, old fellow."

Tom Fenner climbed slowly to his feet, square jaw working. He snapped, "Shut up, Perk," out of the corner of his mouth, then steadied himself as he faced the Englishman.

"Yuh're all mixed up, Lord Beaver, or whatever yore handle is.

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Take it slow, now, an' pick yore trail ahead of yore tongue, and maybe we'll get this ironed out. You lost something, huh? What?"

Lord Beverly's lower jaw jumped out an inch, and a frigid light kindled in his clear blue eyes.

"Jove, don't spoof me, old chap. I have my rights, you know. Lost something, eh? They were pilfered, stolen. All thirty of my propagators —I mean to say—"

"Propaga—*what!*" Tom Fenner started to cough, choked.

A chill glint crept into Peaceful's heavy-lidded eyes, and he pushed to his feet, a faint hard smile crawling across his lips.

"Yuh mean something that keeps things goin', don't you, Bevvy," he drawled. "Like a stud an' mare hoss and a foal crop, huh? Maybe yuh mean breeders?"

The Englishman's head bobbed. "Bully well put, old boy! Breeders, you know. Brought them here to breed the finest stock in the country. Make the pater back home proud of me, what? But they're gone! All thirty of my bulls and bullets—"

Tom Fenner's face got red. "Bullets?" he croaked.

"My word, yes! Bullets, old top—little bulls, I mean to say. Sam Breathitt took them last night. Deucedly bad taste for a neighbor, what? Maybe they'll get them back for me, but I jolly well thought I'd better get the constable . . . er . . . sheriff."

Peaceful's eyes went bleak and hard behind heavy lids. "They?" he drawled. "Yuh mean someone's gone to get back that stock for yuh, Bevvy?"

Lord Beverly screwed the monocle into his eye again, and fastened his stare on the big puncher.

"My word. I mean to say you don't think I'm a bally . . . er . . . tenderfoot, as you cow persons put it, what? I jolly well tracked my propagators right up to Mr. Breathitt's land. Resourceful of me, eh? I must write the pater about it, you know. Mr. Condon and his employees happened along while I was on the spoor, the trail, don't you know. He offered to try to get back my bulls for me. Dashed sporting of him, what?"

Tom Fenner turned slowly to face Peaceful, lips thinning into a grim, flat line. His voice came in a puzzled growl.

"It don't make sense, Jig Condon or his gun skunks doin' anybody a good turn. Funny him sellin' out like that. Whatever a thousand pounds amounts to in dollars, it ain't half what the Turkeytrack was worth. How do you figure it, Perk?"

Peaceful wagged his head gloomily, eyes hooded sleepily. "Trouble," he drawled wearily. "Whenever yuh can't understand something, you can put it down as nothin' else but trouble. Me, I felt it comin' a long time. It ain't natural a peace-lovin' jasper like me could get quiet an' tranquillity in this town of crime an' corruption."

## II.

The westering sun was a red-and-gold ball hanging low over the ragged crest of the Brimstone. Another hour would bring dusk, but the freshening evening breeze brought scant relief from the smother of heat that lay dead and still over the range land.

A subtle tenseness rode the saddle with Peaceful Perkins. His eyes were heavy-lidded, sleepy, yet grimly alert behind veiling lashes, takinging in the swale and coulee ahead and around him. The gloomy expression on his unlovely, long-jawed face clouded deeper as the minutes wore on.

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"Just like a magnet, that's me," he drawled glumly. "Shore as a trouble storm piles up, it hunts me to blow on. If it wasn't these cow tracks draggin' me into a ruckus, it'd be something else. Just the cross I have to pack through life, I reckon."

At his side, Tom Fenner snorted with mounting anger. "The only trouble you have is not bein' able to find enough wars to ram yore big nose into," he growled.

Lord Beverly, bouncing at one side in a postage-stamp English saddle, looked around with interest.

"Jove, old man," he exclaimed, "you don't expect there to be any difficulty over this, what?"

Peaceful wagged his head dismally. "Nothin' serious, I reckon, Bevvy. Maybe a little shootin' and some gents gettin' killed, but I figure it won't be nothin' bad."

The Englishman jerked erect. "Haw, you're spoofing me again," he brayed. "Jolly fellows, you cow persons. Must tell the pater about you. A little shooting, you say? Bally nuisance, that, I mean to say. But a bit exciting, what?"

Tom Fenner coughed and choked. Peaceful's chill gray eyes shifted around him restlessly, probing each lengthening shadow behind yucca and mesquite. Here the trail dipped down into a draw to skirt a mud-banked water hole. Peaceful's eyes narrowed slightly, sweeping the red mud that was pitted with fresh tracks of horses and cattle. His lips tightened, and he growled wearily.

"Excitin', if that's what you call stopping gun lead. But me bein' a peace-lovin' jasper, all I hanker for is—"

Somewhere ahead, a gun crashed. Echoes shuddered up the draw, and silence fell only to be shattered instantly by a blaring burst of shots. Overheard, a low circling buzzard wheeled, startled, then climbed

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swiftly toward the cloud piles above. Tom Fenner jerked around in his saddle, lips flat and hard.

"Lord Beaver, you stay here, savvy. This ain't no tea social. Them gents are shootin' for keeps, whoever they are."

The Englishman yelped indignantly. "Well, fawncy that! I'm no slacker, you know. In my veins is the stern stuff of the—"

Peaceful's racing horse carried him out of hearing of the Englishman's voice. He rode low in the saddle, eyes narrowed against the hot air that hammered at his face. The draw twisted and snaked its way through clumps of cholla and cat's-claw that clutched like barbed fingers at him with each pounding stride of his horse.

The draw deepened and widened swiftly, then abruptly the walls sloped off onto a sage-mottled flat. In one flashing glance, Peaceful took in the scene. Old Sam Breathitt's cabin squatted in the middle of the flat, a scant hundred yards away; and, even as he saw it, his attention was riveted by three gunmen racing forward in a low crouch: Jig Condon, Drag Gorman, Loop Bonney, death in every line of their low-bent bodies.

A yell surged to Peaceful's lips, died there unuttered. Nothing could stop the purpose of those three men at this late moment. Their guns had stilled now, and they raced on toward the house, deadly in their silence.

Then Peaceful made out the figure huddled in the cabin's doorway. The figure stirred as Peaceful's horse stretched out in a wild burst of speed. Old Sam Breathitt was down, but there was still life in his work-stooped body. Breathitt stirred; it was as if he was coming out of a stupor. He moved slow, painfully slow. With an effort that seemed to drag the last flicker of strength from his body, he pushed to his elbows.

Jig Condon's voice rang out in a high-pitched yell of warning.

"Look out! The damn rustler still wants to fight!"

Sam Breathitt fought his Spencer carbine up stubbornly. The gunmen were no more than a dozen yards from him, but he didn't seem to see them. His gun leveled, wavered blindly, crashed to spend its slug into the emptiness of the sky.

Jig Condon's shot roared in echo. Sam Breathitt's body flinched under the shock of lead. He swayed, still fighting to hold himself up as the dark wings of death closed over him.

## III.

Peaceful was first to reach the body of the oldster. He reined in sharply, hit the ground running to kneel beside the huddled figure. Life had fled old Sam Breathitt's body, but even death did not rob him of the stubborn set to his jaw. There was blood; it was like a small red worm crawling between slightly parted lips toward the shock of snowy hair.

A slow, ragged breath whistled through Peaceful's drawn lips, as he stared at the crumpled body. For an instant his face went bleak and stony; then all expression faded, and his eyes hooded sleepily. He stood up to find Tom Fenner standing close by, square jaw like chiseled rock.

"Dead?" One word, and it was harsh, bitter.

Peaceful dropped his head in a nod. The lawman jerked around, gray streaking his jaw. When he

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spoke, his voice came low and strained.

"I knowed Sam Breathitt twenty years, gents. A lot of jiggers tried to call him a rustler at times, but they could never prove it. Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't; I don't know. But he's dead now, so maybe you'd better tell how it started."

Peaceful turned to see Jig Condon and his men standing just beyond the porch steps. They were a hard-bitten crew, killers all. Condon was tall and slope-shouldered; Drag Gorman, thickset, bearded, with bulging colorless eyes; Loop Bonney, a smooth-faced runt of a man, with cold venom in every line of his stunted body. Smoke whisped upward like faint blue feathers from the muzzles of the guns they help; and Loop Bonney's eyes held a festering glint of mockery. Jig Condon took a short step forward, a thin grin twisting his flat lips. His voice came in a toneless rasp.

"Ain't much to tell that you can't see for yoreself, Fenner. We seen Lord Beverly, and offered to get back the cattle old man Breathitt rustled from him. Got here, and Breathitt was gone—lookin' for some place to hide the stock, I reckon. We waited, but he slipped up an' got the drop on us. We managed to bust out of the house—or he'd murdered us shore. He knowed he'd played his hand out this time. He cut loose on us when we was runnin' for our hosses, an' we had to fight back. But the rustlin' son drew low cards when he started this fracas."

"And them rustled bulls?" Peaceful's voice was a gloomy drawl.

Jig Condon jerked his hand toward the corner of the house, lips tightening slightly.

"If yuh'd used yore eyes, yuh'd seen 'em in Breathitt's corral where he put 'em," he snapped.

Peaceful nodded sleepily, eyes drifting over the three gunmen. Their clothes were powdered with dust, and rust-red clay clung to their boots.

"I reckon you tracked them bulls here," he drawled softly.

Jig Condon's eyes turned to chips of agate. "Hell, no, we didn't track 'em," he ground out. "Lord Beverly followed them tracks to Breathitt's line fence, and that was good enough for us. Dammit, you act like— Perk, what are you drivin' at, anyway?"

Peaceful's wide shoulders lifted, lowered lazily. "Nothin' much," he said dismally. "It's just the way I get when some polecats bust up my peace an' quiet. I'm just an easy-goin' cuss, I reckon; and my nerves can't stand a ruckus. You tried to take over Sam Breathitt's land for a long time, didn't yuh, Condon."

Condon's eyes squeezed tight. "He was rustlin' me blind, so I tried to buy him out. He knew he had a good thing, and I couldn't prove nothin', so he balked. Then I sold out to Lord Beverly."

Peaceful's eyelids lowered, veiling the bleak lights that flared in his stare. His voice came in a dispassionate whisper.

"Funny the way things work out, ain't it, Condon. With Breathitt dead, you wouldn't have no trouble at all buyin' his spread from the county. And once yuh had Breathitt's spread, yuh wouldn't have much trouble squeezin' out Lord Bevvy. You stood to clean up big both ways. Funny, ain't it, Condon?"

Loop Bonney swayed forward, his eyes suddenly hot coals of hatred.

He started harshly, "Boss, this long-jawed galoot—"

Jig Condon broke in gratingly.

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"Shut up, dammit! Perk, that big mouth of yores is talking you into a hunk of hell. Old man Breathitt jumped us when we braced him about that rustlin'. He shot a gun out of Gorman's hand when we called him. It's layin' back there, if you want proof."

Peaceful nodded, at once bleak and cold, lips flattening over clenched teeth.

"That was after Sam Breathitt came to, wasn't it, skunks? That lump on the side of his head—you pole-axed him so's you could wait till we showed up before you finished yore job. Then you cut loose with yore guns to make it look like an even fight."

Condon's face drained gray, then flooded dark.

"Damn you, Perk—" His voice choked off, as he fought to grip flaring venom.

Peaceful smiled icily. "I reckon for once you was tellin' the truth when you said you cut straight through from Lord Bevvy's land to get here. You didn't have no call to lie, 'cause you *knew* them rustled bulls was here. You brought them here to frame Breathitt! That red mud on yore boots—you couldn't have picked it up anywhere except by that water hole in the draw you drove that stock through. You—"

With an oath, Jig Condon lurched forward. His move was like that of a huge cat, smooth, sliding, deadly. Peaceful's hands plunged gunward, jerked to a halt, as Condon's Colt swept up. Murder was in the man's eyes, in the sneering twist of his lips.

"I said you'd talk yoreself into hell, loud mouth," he rasped. "Fenner, get yore paws up, damn you. You ain't got long left, so don't rush things. Perk, you're first!"

His gun jabbed forward, hammer rocking back under his bony thumb. Then he stiffened at the mild voice that came from behind him.

"Raise your hands, gentlemen! Up high, my dear fellows, I mean to say! Deucedly annoying this, but I'll shoot if I must. We Wychcliffs are made of the stern stuff, don't you know."

Jig Condon whirled as if stung. Drag Gorman and Loop Bonney spun, leaping to one side as if jerked by a string. Peaceful's eyes snapped up to see Lord Beverly standing beyond the porch steps, gripping a heavy Colt in both hands.

One instant, Jig Condon stood poised, then a hoarse, hacking laugh broke from his lips.

"That gun—the one Breathitt's slug busted!" His yell was high-pitched, ringing, savage. "Burn him, boys! He's yores!"

Even as the killers' Colts swiveled, Peaceful threw himself back and to one side. His voice rang out piercingly.

"Back, Bevvy! Fenner! *This way, skunks!*"

The three killers whipped around as one. Muzzle flame raked the gathering shadows.

Peaceful's first slug caught Loop Bonney in the middle. It seemed to lift the slender gunman bodily into the air, hammer him back to pitch limply to the ground in a huddled, twitching heap.

From the corner of his eye, Peaceful saw Drag Gorman sway, catch himself, then fall heavily, and knew vaguely that Tom Fenner's guns had burst into life.

Twice, Peaceful saw faint gouts of dust puff out from the front of Jig Condon's shirt, but still the lathy killer held to his feet. Powder flame speared from the muzzle of Condon's gun. It seemed a white-hot branding iron had been thrust against the

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back of Peaceful's hand, bringing swift, sudden numbness. He swayed to one side, the gun in his right hand chopping down. But he held his fire.

Even in death, Jig Condon was gripped by the lust to kill. He fought, but the weight of his Colts dragged his hands down. His guns bounced, throwing slugs into the dust at his feet, then all strength drained from him, and he slid loosely to the ground.

A slow grin was spreading across Peaceful's wide mouth when Lord Beverly strode up a moment later. Peaceful eyed Tom Fenner sleepily.

"Takes all the joy out of peace an' quiet when an easy-goin' gent like me has to go to war for it. Now if Lord Bevvy hadn't showed up when he did—"

The Englishman chortled. "Stern stock, we Wychcliffs, what? Quaint manner you Americans have dealing with culprits. Effective, indeed. Must write the pater about it. Save the government money, don't you know—trails, all that sort. But my propagators, are they here?"

Peaceful nodded. "Reckon yore bulls are around back in the corral, Bevvy."

The Englishman screwed the monocle into his eye. "And the bullets?"

Peaceful chuckled, yawning. "Yores are in the corral, Bevvy. I reckon Jig Condon and his skunks got Fenner's and mine."

Lord Beverly slanted a glance toward the lawman and drawled, "Ripping, that, eh what, old chap? Bullet-ripping, don't you know!"

THE END.

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# ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Who Knows?*

1. *Is there any difference between a horseman and a horse man?*
2. *Why are cowboys called "punchers"?*
3. *If a cowboy is said to punch cattle, is he said to punch horses?*
4. *Why don't most cowboys wear two guns?*
5. *Why do cowboys adopt stray mongrel dogs in timbered country?*
6. *How many kinds of locoweed are there? What are their names?*
7. *What words are the result of the effect of locoweed upon cattle?*
8. *Why wouldn't an old-timer make a prisoner hand over a six-gun butt first?*
9. *What kind of saddle is used by cowboys in their work?*
10. *Was it originally used in the country for which it was named?*

*Answers on page 112*



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# HE HAD TO SAVE

## by ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Montana Slim an' Scotty,
Our stingiest bunkhouse pard,
Start bettin' right after supper,
On cuttin' the highest card.

Slim loses out all evenin',
Then says like it was a joke:
"I'll give yuh the dough some pay day,
For I started the game dead broke."

Big Scotty don't do nō fussin',
So we figger he's shy on nerve,
An' we say if Slim don't pay him,
He'll git what he'll deserve.

Next mornin' we start at daybreak
To ride to the upper range,
An' Slim's all bright an' chipper,
While Scotty is glum an' strange.

When we stop at a mountain torrent,
Swelled up by the meltin' snows,
Slim walks to the bank for water.
It crumbles an' in he goes.

We're standin' around plumb helpless,
As we watch the strugglin' Slim
A-splashin' around in the rapids;
Then we see that the man can't swim.

But quick as a wink, big Scotty
Dives in an' he stays on down,
Till he brings Slim up to the surface,
As we're thinkin' they both will drown.

Then he steers Slim into a saplin,'
That's snagged in the boilin' crick,
An' yells: "Git movin', fellers,
An' throw us a rope here quick."

We splice our lines together
An' throw him the end in haste.
Then watch as it floats to Scotty,
An' he ties it around his waist.

"When yo're haulin' me in, go easy.
Don't jerk on the line!" he hollers.
"For I don't want to lose this jasper.
He owes me eleven dollars!"

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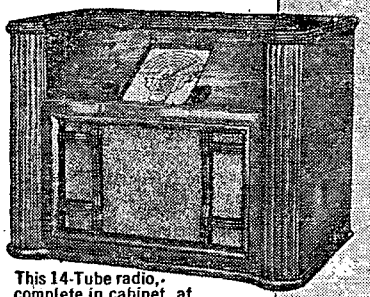

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*When a waddy vanishes, it's plumb serious, but when he can't get to his pants, it's a durned sight more annoyin'!*

# EMPTY CHAPS

## by S. OMAR BARKER

DREAMY DORKIN came busting out of the Kitty Cat bunkhouse that Sunday morning like a choused boar hog with a knot in its tail. From one big hand swung a half-filled war bag, from the other dangled a disorderly clutch of ropes in mixed varieties and lengths. Even from the horse trough where they were stripping for a weekly wash, Soogan Sam and Swaller Fork perceived right away that the kid's bristles were up. His pants sagged and his shirt tail was out.

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As he crossed the high porch toward the steps, a shrimp-sized, gooseberry-nosed *muchacho* came hopping like a two-legged squirrel out an open window to head him off.

"Jeem-for-the-crackits, Drimmy!" he said. "Come back! Don't got mad joost because—"

When the skinny young puncher did not pause, the little Mexican suddenly grabbed his flying shirt tail and gave it a dally around a porch post. With his hands too full to do anything else, Dreamy bowed his neck and lunged, the shirt tail ripped, and the sudden release sent him lunging head-first off the high porch to root up half a yard of gravel with his snoot.

He got up with a sheepish grin on his long, homely face, but it faded plenty quick when Swaller Fork Cassoway laughed. Disregarding the *muchacho* still at his heels, Dreamy paused at the horse trough.

"You laughin' at me, Swaller Fork?" His twangy voice was edged with challenge.

Swaller Fork's round, owlish eyes blinked solemnly up at him from where their owner sat naked and sloshing in the horse trough. The Kitty Cat crew had raised Dreamy Dorkin from a button, and they knew how touchy he got sometimes when he was mad. They liked him too well to egg him on unduly.

"It's the pet catfish in this trough," Swaller Fork explained. "His whiskers tickle me. Fact is, I never even seen you tumble; an' if I had, I prob'ly wouldn't 'a' laughed —if I could help it!"

"You better hadn't!" snorted Dreamy.

"Where you headin' with all that gear?" inquired Soogan Sam. "Ain't quittin' us ag'in, are yuh?"

"I ain't totin' this war bag to milk ducks in!"

"The risson for thees," volunteered Chato, the little Mexican, "thass becauss the boss was shaving an' she cot heemself! Thees make heem mad an'—"

"You keep your squeal outta this hog-scrapin', Chato!" Dreamy broke in sharply. "Go climb on your mule an' run in ol' Bear Sign for me!"

With a stiffness that he thought was dignity, Dreamy stalked on toward the saddle sheds. Soogan Sam looked after him soberly. The kid had had these quitting spells before, and Bear Sign was his own private pony—so it looked like he meant to be on his way again.

Soogan Sam grabbed Chato by the sleeve.

"What the hell has ol' Doc cuttin' himself got to do with Dreamy goin' off half-cocked thisaway, Chato?"

"Thass becauss Drimmy was speening the rope," explained Chato importantly. "He wass speening it around the choulders of my oncle while she was pilling the potatoes.

"The boss, she wass nize quiet shaving in the keetchen, but she cot heemself, so right away he wass geeving Drimmy to the devil for alla time speening the ropes, but Drimmy say whassamatta nobody gonna let heem make practice around here, maybe more better he go some places where the art from ropes speening is more appreciate. So the boss say what's kippin' heem? So—"

"But what the hell did Dreamy's rope spinnin' have to do with Doc cuttin' himself in the first place?"

"Oh, thees! Thass because he jomp when my oncle drop the potatoes pan. The reason he drop it, thass becauss while Drimmy was speening the rope around the cook, me myself, I speen another one around Drimmy, but ketch on hees albow. Thees also make Drimmy's ketch on the albow of my oncle,

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wheech steeck the pilling knife in hees leg, he drop the pan, the boss, she's jump for surprise, an'—"

"Yeah—you told us—he cut himself," busted in Soogan Sam dryly. "Come on, Swaller Fork, let's go see if we can argue the kid outta his huff."

"All right, only I'd be more convincin' with a few clothes on!"

"Git 'em on, then. I wish ol' Slim was here. Dreamy listens to him a heap better'n he does us."

"Funny ol' Slim ain't back, ain't it? Reckon that homesteader made trouble for him?"

Dreamy Dorkin was already saddling up Bear Sign by the time they dressed and got to him. But their persuasion was fruitless.

"I'm gittin' fed up with cowpunchin', anyways," he growled. "That's what I taken up this rope spinnin' for. I'm goin' to foller the rodeos an' git to be trick-ropin' champeen of the world!"

"I knowed a gal once," offered Swaller Fork, "that spin a rope from a hook fastened onto her bustle. It was quite a sight. She jest—"

"Well, luck to yuh, kid," said Soogan Sam. "Maybe you ort to hole up at Chilito a day or so, jest in case of a funeral or somethin'."

"Funeral? Whose funeral you talkin' about?"

"Nobody's—I hope. But it ain't like Slim Hardy to miss his Sunday dip in the hoss trough thisaway. Course, if anything's happened to him, we'll git word to you, Dreamy. Well, so long."

For an instant a look of hesitation occupied Dreamy's homely features. Then he swung into the saddle.

"Phooey!" he scoffed. "You cain't head me off thataway, Sam. There ain't no trouble goin' to overtake ol' Slim that he can't handle! Tell him good-by for me, will yuh?"

Two lengths behind him, as he dusted away, like an undersized monkey on an oversized hobby horse, followed Chato on his mule. Dreamy Dorkin did not even glance back at him. Some five miles from the ranch Chato finally ventured to spur up alongside.

"Hello, Drimmy!" he tried to sound like he had just happened along.

No answer.

"Esscuse pliss, maybe you no like that I'm come along, eh?"

"I don't give a hoot what you do!" said Dreamy. "Only shut up. I ain't in no talkin' mood."

"But, Drimmy, s'pozzin'—"

"Shut up!"

"But s'pozzin' Sleem got some troubles from thees homestadder? S'pozzin'—"

"Shut up!"

"Poor Chato!" the little Mex spoke mournfully to Julia, the mule. "If Drimmy no like me, more better I wass dead from a baby!"

"Hell, I like you all right—like a dog likes fleas—but if you don't shut up, I'm gonna—"

He broke off sharply as Bear Sign suddenly threw up his head and whinnied. From the gullied country eastward came an answering nicker, faint against the wind. Then Dreamy saw the horse coming toward them. A loose horse with an empty saddle is usually bad news on any man's cow range. Dreamy Dorkin's heart turned over like a flapping catfish when he recognized this as the bronc Slim Hardy had been riding. At first it looked like a man's body hanging across the saddle. Closer he saw that it was only empty chaps.

Quickly Dreamy roped the pony. The chaps were Slim Hardy's. There was dried, sandy river mud on them as well as the saddle—and a few faint smears of blood.

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"I betcha thees homestadder bang heem with hees twice-barrel shoot gun an' throw heem in the reever—what you theenk, eh?"

"I think," said Dreamy Dorkin, his voice grim, "we better git goin'!"

Back-tracking Slim Hardy's horse was tedious and slow.

"Couldn't of got that there sandy mud on his saddle nowhere but the river," said Dreamy. "We kinder got the course now. We'll jest swing over an' foller down the bank till we pick up sign where he left it."

## II.

In a draw a mile or so from the Arenoso River they came upon a lone homesteader's dugout. Dreamy yanked up suddenly to stare at a brownish crust on the sand.

"Blood!" he whispered hoarsely. "An' them's Slim's boot tracks, or I'll eat 'em!"

"Me myself, I theenk more better we go back queeck for halp, eh?"

Dreamy heard a door creak at the dugout. The double-eyed muzzle of a shotgun poked out.

"An' I come off in such a huff I never even brung my gun!" groaned Dreamy bitterly. But Chato shot a skinny hand into one of the battered saddlebags on his saddle and lugged out a six-gun. Dreamy had no more than time to grab it when the homesteader came out, a shotgun swung over his arm. He stared in surprise at the six-gun this gangly young puncher held pointed at his middle.

"I got it on yuh, mister!" Dreamy's drawl was sharp in tone. "I done seen the blood—what've you done with him?"

"I don't know who the hellfire you are," snorted the homesteader. "But my name's Jones—an' us Joneses don't answer nobody's questions at the open end of a pistol! If you—"


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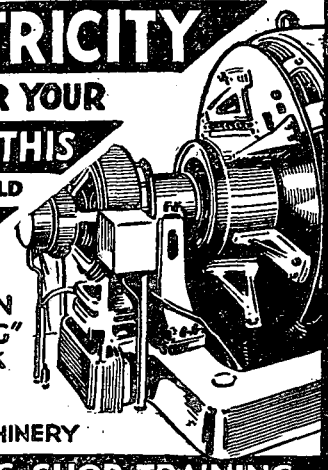

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"Oh thees!" Chato broke in airily. "Don't put no objections to the *pistola*, Meester Jone'! She ain't got loaded, anyhow!"

"Well, my shotgun is!" said the homesteader. "You boys got any business here, you better state it quick, for I—"

"Shucks, Mr. Jones!" Dreamy managed to fake a friendly grin to hide his dismay. "We was jest kinder foolin'!"

He tossed the six-gun nonchalantly to the woodpile.

"Fact is, I'm a rope spinner by perfession. Jest happened apast here an'—look, how's that for a quick, purty loop?"

As he talked, Dreamy's fingers had quickly loosened one of his cotton spinning ropes from the saddle and started a little loop whirling.

"Look here, young feller—I got no time to watch a lunatic spin a rope! I got to git on over to the river an'—"

A sudden jerk of Dreamy's wrist sent the gently spinning loop leaping upward and out to drop and tighten so swiftly upon the shotgun barrel that it was yanked out of the homesteader's hand before he realized what had happened.

But one hammer caught on Mr. Jones' shirt front, pulled back, whammed down and fired the left barrel. At the gun's roar Chato's mule jumped clear over the woodpile, leaving Chato sitting on a chunk of mesquite root. His brown face as sickly pale as a last year's turnip, Chato took off his old black hat and stared at the ragged hole where the crown had been.

As the yanked shotgun bumped his flank, Bear Sign, too, came unraveled. Somehow Dreamy managed to hang onto the nubbin with one hand and the shotgun with the other. He was just getting the pony smoothed out again, when a bony

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mule came galloping up the draw, a small, slenderish figure in overalls bouncing on its bare back. The late afternoon sun gleamed on a girl's long, golden hair. In her arms she carried a bundle. Her pretty face was at once haggard-looking, as if from fright, and red from sun and exertion.

"Oh, dad!" She flung herself off the mule almost hysterically. "He—he must be drowned! I've been up and down the river—everywhere! I looked and looked—all I could find was . . . was . . . these."

Dreamy stared hard at the bundle he recognized as Slim Hardy's shirt, pants and underwear. Then, remembering the book he had read on "How To Be a Detective," he dismounted and faced Homesteader Jones grimly.

"So that's it, huh?" he gulped. "Slim Hardy come here peaceable to order you off the Kitty Cat range, so you murdered him an' throwed his body in the river! I might have knowed—"

"Dad," said the girl, her pretty but now red-rimmed eyes looking Dreamy coldly up and down, "who is this idiot?"

"No use makin' eyes at me, sister!" Dreamy tried to sound hard-boiled. "Chato! You take this here shotgun an' hold these here prizners till I git back! I'm goin' to ride the river for pore ol' Slim's body!"

"But, Drimmy, for gosh-my-sakes, I don't theenk—"

"Well, I *do!*" Dreamy cut him off abruptly. "Didn't we see the blood where they packed him on his own saddle? You do as I say!"

He thrust the shotgun into Chato's unwilling hands.

"Why, you're crazy!" began the girl. "Can't you understand that—"

"Save your wind, sister!" Dreamy cut her off. "An' no funny business while I'm gone or Chato's li'ble to blow you wide open!"

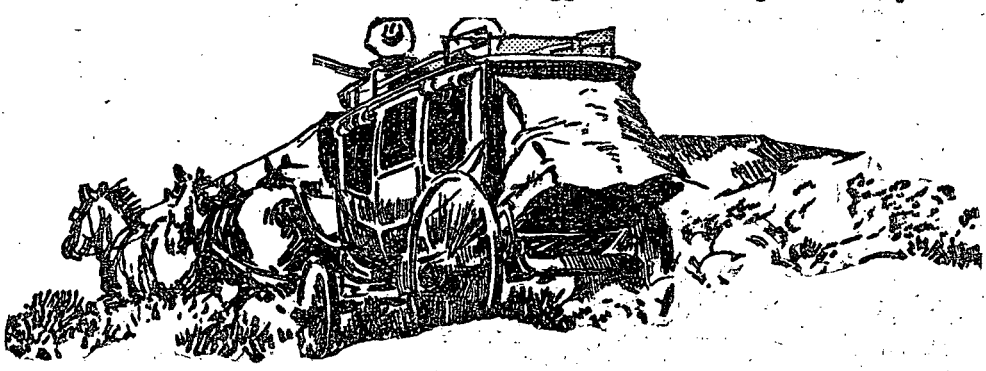
Swiftly Dreamy swung to the saddle, socked spurs to his horse and sped away in a fog of dust.

After a brief and noisy conference with the homesteader's bony mule, Chato's long-eared Julia seemed to prefer the company of Bear Sign. Holding her head sideways to keep from stepping on the dragging bridle reins, she set out to follow. Leaning the shotgun against the woodpile, Chato ran to catch the mule. He caught him all right—but when he came back, Homesteader Jones had the shotgun.

"Now listen to me, young squirt!" he said, and as he sounded plenty mad, Chato listened.

## III.

The thought of Slim Hardy's body lodged somewhere on a bank of the sluggish Arenoso put cruelty into



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Dreamy Dorkin's spurs. Bear Sign had never traveled so fast before in his life. As he rode into the cedar thicket masking the river bank, Dreamy planned what to do. First he would find, by sign-reading, just where they had dumped the body in, then work downstream, searching every inch of the sandy, sluggish flow. Maybe—it was a forlorn hope—maybe ol' Slim wouldn't be dead.

A sudden, splashing sound as when a man dives into fairly deep water, broke in on his gloomy thoughts. Once more he socked in the spurs, but Bear Sign balked at venturing too near the edge of the high bank from beyond which the splash had come. Grabbing a rope from the saddle, Dreamy swung down and ran on afoot. He topped the bank too fast. Too late, he felt its rim give way with him. The next thing he knew he was part of a small landslide, tumbling headlong into a deep pool of water.

And the next thing he knew somebody was dragging him out on a lower bank a few yards downstream.

"Dadgum your gizzard, Dreamy!" Slim Hardy stood over him, naked as a peeled turnip. "Can't a feller even chase a catfish without you comin' along an' cavin' a mountain in on him?"

"But . . . but gosh, Slim! There was blood on your saddle, an' blood by the woodpile! I figgered them Joneses had murdered you an'—"

"Catfish blood," busted in Slim dryly. "I come to lay down the law to ol' Jones yesterday about behavin' hisself on Kitty Cat range, an' done so. But instid of sassin' me, they invited me to stay all night. I snuck out early this mornin' an' caught 'em a couple of catfish for breakfast. Ol' Jones took on so much about the thirty pound cats he used to spear back in Mizzoury that I got my dander up an' decided to catch 'em a sixty-pounder with my bare hands. Then my dang bronc quit me an'—"

"You mean you've spent the whole dang day tryin' to land a catfish?"

"Hell, no! I've spent most of it hidin' under cutbanks an' skulkin' in the cedars to keep my indecent exposure from the view of a lady. Lucy Jones has been paradin' the river bank all day, lookin' for my pore drowned body. She must of saw my pony an' figgered— Wup! Looky yonder!"

Upstream, on a high bank beyond a bend, Dreamy spied three people: Chato, the Homesteader Jones and the slim figure of his pretty daughter.

"Hey, Dreamy!" Slim Hardy's hoarse whisper came now from behind a salt cedar bush. "Run git me my clothes. I left 'em up the bank a piece, under a—"

"Last time I seen 'em," drawled Dreamy, "Miss Lucy Jones was huggin' 'em to her boozem, blubberin' over a pore cowboy's drownin'. Maybe she brung 'em with her. I'll holler an' see— Hey-hoo!" He yelled and waved. "If you're lookin' for a drowned cowboy, come on down here an' view the body!"

"But hell, Dreamy—"

"You jest lay there an' pertend you're dead," Dreamy advised soothingly. "I'll cover you with my hat an'—"

Without waiting to hear him out, Slim Hardy, down on all fours, dodging from bush to bush, scurried like a scared gopher to the low bank, plunged into the water and submerged to his nose. Luckily for his modesty, it was roiled enough now to hide the rest of him.

To the Joneses, when they arrived, Dreamy pointed out Slim's head, barely visible out in the pool.

"You see," he explained, "ol'

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Slim's in there a-straddle of that sixty-pound catfish an' rarin' to ride him out where I can rope him, only—well, he's kinder modist, so if you'll jist turn your back for a minute while I git a loop spinnin'—"

With an admiring glance at Dreamy's rope-spinning skill, the blushing Miss Jones started obligingly to turn away, collided head on with Chato, lost her balance, and tumbled down the bank into the water.

Whether he helped her more than he hindered may have been doubtful, but at least it was Dreamy Dorkin who plunged in to the rescue. And with the girl thus occupied, Slim Hardy swam swiftly ashore and grabbed the Sunday pants Chato tossed to him out of Dreamy's war bag. In his haste he got into them backwards—but even so they were better than no pants at all. Besides, the girl's attention seemed diverted now toward Dreamy Dorkin.

It was Chato who broke up the cross-fire of explanations and mutual apologies. He tugged at Dreamy's sleeve.

"*Por dios,* Drimmy!" he urged. "More better we vamoose queeck now to Chilito, eef you gonna ketch those train, because—"

"Train? Shucks, Chato, how's ol' Slim gonna git back to the ranch without us along to herd him outta the river? Besides"—Dreamy batted his eyes bashfully in Miss Lucy Jones' direction—"besides, after rescuin' a lady from drownin' I'm kinder obliged not to quit the country without gittin' better acquainted, ain't I?"

"Sure for Mike!" said Chato. "Thass what I feeger when I poosh her in!"

Did you like this yarn? Drop a note to the Range Boss and burn your brand of "yes" or "no" on Dreamy and Chato.

THE END.

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Here's a true Western experience sent in by a pard who has spun his yarns in the Corner before:

### STAGECOACH REMINISCENCES

By Jerry Tuttle—Age 28
The Dalles, Oregon

In Cheyenne, Wyoming, a few years ago I knew an old-time stagecoach driver whom we called Uncle Dave. He was a thin-lipped little hombre with sharp blue eyes and a neatly cropped goatee. His clipped speech and quick actions marked him as a typical Western pioneer. Despite his age, which was well past eighty, he was as spry as some men of forty-five. He always dressed in a dark suit, flat-topped, broad-brimmed hat and polished boots.

Uncle Dave came from Kentucky in a covered wagon when he was a kid. He had lots of colorful experiences of his own. But what he really liked best of all to tell about were the adventures of his stagecoach-driving friends who were lashed over the mountains in Concords drawn by six horses before Uncle Dave was born.

One of his favorite stories concerned his old friend, Benjamin Wing, a stagecoach driver who used to run between Virginia City and Salt Lake City when Uncle Dave was still a kid in knee pants.

Old Ben was a stickler for law. To his


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way of figuring, anything written down on paper was an order to be carried out in every detail, according to Uncle Dave. If he was scheduled to be at a certain place at noon, he felt like a criminal if he arrived at half past twelve.

One trip over the Wasatch mountain range, old Ben carried as passengers inside his coach, two deputy sheriffs and a prisoner whom they were returning to Salt Lake City to stand trial for horse stealing.

As they entered a long, rocky canyon, the prisoner suddenly bolted, leaped from the coach and ran down the road. The surprised deputies tumbled out of the coach, one on each side, whipped out their guns and shot the fleeing prisoner, killing him instantly.

Ben Wing, holding the reins of his six horses, made no comment on the situation until the deputies began looking around for shovels, intending to bury the victim.

"Nothin' doin'," said the law-abiding stagecoach driver, shaking his head. "These papers say 'You are commanded to take the body of Richard Garner to Salt Lake City.' He's express matter now an' I'm a-goin' to take him there."

"But that means his live body," the deputies argued. "He's dead now, so there ain't no use takin' him any farther."

"It don't say so," responded old Ben. "It says the body of Richard Garner, an' I'm a-goin' to take him there like it says."

Seeing that it was useless to argue further with the stubborn stagecoach driver, they tied the "express" on the back boot of the coach and continued the trip to Salt Lake City.

When the coach arrived at its destination, it was followed down the street by a howling bunch of citizens. Whooping and hollering as they pointed at the dead horse thief swaying and staring blankly at them from behind.

Another one of Uncle Dave's favorite stories was about the Wells Fargo fast freight. Those were high-heeled, canvas-covered wagons, pulled by six horses. They made almost as much time as the express stages. They hauled anything from perishable merchandise to mining machinery.

Beside the driver sat a man with a five-foot horn called a swamper, which he tooted to clear the narrow roads of mule teams, buckboards and buggies.

Passengers, at low fares, rode inside on whatever seats they could find.

On one trip, according to Uncle Dave, a

# ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Answers:*

*Continued from page 99*

1. *Yes. A horseman excels in horsemanship. A horse man is a raiser of horses.*
2. *It relates to a metal-pointed goad which they used to prod cattle when loading them into railroad cars.*
3. *No. He is said to herd horses.*
4. *Because cowboys, like most men, are naturally lazy, and the weight of two Colt .45s with their ammunition is entirely too heavy.*
5. *Because mongrel dogs are easiest trained to corner a bear in a bear hunt, being good "bear dogs."*
6. *Four. They are: woolly loco, rattleweed, blue loco, and stemless loco.*
7. *"Locoed," meaning "mad" or "crazy," and "rattled," meaning "confused."*
8. *Because this might mean sudden death. The prisoner might have his finger in the trigger guard, or a quick snap of the wrist could put the gun into firing position.*
9. *The Mexican or stock saddle, also called "range saddle" and "cow saddle."*
10. *No. It was originated over one thousand years ago by the Moors.*

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certain fast freight carried two caskets which contained a dead woman and a miner who had departed this world. The live passengers were an Irish miner and a fat Negro woman.

Night settled over the mountains and the wagon rolled on, creaking and bouncing, while the wind howled and moaned in the trees.

Then the driver and swamper got an idea. Pushing the end of the long horn through the parted curtain behind the seat, until it rested on the floor between the two passengers, they took turns talking through it.

"Ain't it awful to be dead," mourned one voice.

The Irishman and colored woman stared at each other.

"It shore is," replied the other voice, apparently coming from within the other coffin. "Especially with all this jouslin' around."

"There's an Irishman sitting on my neck," said one corpse.

"And I've got a fat cook sittin' on my chest," replied the other.

Both passengers leaped from the wagon and scrambled down the road as fast as feet could carry them.

It took a lot of persuasion and explaining to get either passenger to re-enter the wagon. And, although she climbed in beside the Irishman, the cook alighted at the first stop to await a daylight stagecoach to continue her journey.

Durned if that isn't the sort of true story we like to read, pard, and I reckon plenty readers will second the motion. Those old-time stage drivers sure were a tough breed of grizzlies. So were most of the hombres in their country. No wonder there's whang leather in the make-up of their descendants today!

Thanks, amigo, for sending this one in.

Folks, that's all the Corner has room for this week. As you can see, 3W is overloaded with so many good stories we sort of got crowded out. But there'll be a big lot of amateur stories next week. *Hasta la vista.*

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THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! LOOK AT THOSE MUSCLES BULGE OUT NOW!
LATER
THERE'S THAT BIG STIFF AGAIN, SHOWING OFF IN FRONT OF GRACE AND THE CROWD. WELL IT'S MY TURN THIS TIME!
WHAM! - NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY!
OH MAC! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!
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